On The Other Side

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/31183859.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death
Categories:	Gen, M/M
Fandom:	Naruto
Relationships:	Uchiha Sasuke/Uzumaki Naruto, Hatake Kakashi & Uchiha Sasuke, Hatake Kakashi/Uchiha Sasuke, Kyuubi | Nine-tails | Kurama & Uchiha Sasuke
Characters:	Uchiha Sasuke, Kyuubi | Nine-tails | Kurama, Uchiha Itachi, Hatake Kakashi, Uzumaki Naruto, Uchiha Shisui, Background & Cameo Characters, Bijuu | Tailed Beasts (Naruto) - Character, Jinchuuriki (Naruto) - Character, Akatsuki (Naruto) - Character
Additional Tags:	Time Travel, Time Travel Fix-It, Alternate Universe - Time Travel, Human Kyuubi | Nine-tails | Kurama, Angst, Grief/Mourning, POV Uchiha Sasuke, POV Kyuubi | Nine-tails | Kurama, Akatsuki Hunting, Uzushiogakure | Hidden Eddy Village, sasuke is sad, whats new, plot heavy, Canon-Typical Violence, Some Swearing, Non-Linear Narrative, just a little bit, everyone's sad and Naruto is not there, Sasuke makes friends with a bunch of foxes, Kaguya? who's that, Madara is the big bad who ended the world, Ambiguous Relationships, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, It Gets Worse Before It Gets Better, Like Way Worse, The kakashi/sasuke is future!sasuke btw, They're the same age
Language:	English
Collections:	Fics That Restore My Will to Live, Naruto bests, my heart is here, Time Travel no Jutsu, miQ_y's fav fav fics, My heart is full, Naruto ✨Gems✨, Best of Space/Time-travel fix-it's, Uchiha Sasuke, fanfics that i keep coming back to read, best fanfics: naruto edition, Scarecrow Collections, The best fics, Ashes' Library, Kofi's Naruto Favs, A collection of works with quality 😌💅✨, Hatake Kakashi, 5 Star Works, Spirits and Gods, SakurAlpha's Fic Rec of Pure how did you create this you amazing bean, Wicked Wonderfull Works, Best of Hurt/Comfort, Lilranko Interesting Read List, To_read_main_rom, Lost on the Road of Life, Naruto fics that heal me
Stats:	Published: 2021-05-09 Updated: 2025-01-29 Words: 213,387 Chapters: 45/?

On The Other Side

by WideEyedDemon

Summary

Naruto smiles up at him like there’s nothing wrong. His blond hair starts to turn to the color of blood, his blue eyes cloud into red. “I’ll see you on the other side.” He says, just before he burns up right in front of his eyes.
Sasuke screams until he lands flat on his back in a time that’s not his.

Sasuke is tossed back into the past to stop the end of the world, but maybe the universe had wanted Naruto instead.

There's a wild Kurama running loose, rebuilding something that was lost long ago, and maybe thats a problem.

(Or: Time travel where it's Sasuke and Kurama who make it, for better or for worse)

Notes

Hello and welcome! Please enjoy your stay while we head into this train wreck of a fic! It's totally unoriginal and I say that with full seriousness! I mean, c'mon, how many times has "Human Kurama with red hair and red eyes goes back in time to fix things?"

Anyway, there's not a lot of fics that are Sasuke and Kurama, and I thought it would be interesting to have their dynamic without Naruto as a buffer. So we just got two complete assholes, who are both grieving mind you, running around the nations causing chaos and trying to fix things!

A Fate Worse Than Dying

Sasuke doesn't like to think he's been fatally wounded. There's a golden glow of Naruto's and Kyuubi chakra floating around him in a bubble, trying to fix the massive hole in the side of his stomach. He's retching blood, heaving air that goes in, and out, through the puncture in his lung. Sasuke's never felt pain like this before. It's hot enough that his skin is icy, so blindingly white that his eyes spot with blackness. There's a creeping sense of nothing, inching along the corners of his consciousness.

He focuses solely on Naruto's face crowding in front of him, it's the one thing he can see. He can't feel himself smiling up at brilliant blue eyes, eyes that spill salty tears on his cheeks. He can't hear Naruto screaming, only see his mouth moving. He's getting so agitated that his eyes start to fill with a red that Sasuke thinks is blood at first. He's annoyed. Sasuke never really liked that color of red. It reminded him too much of the sharingan. Naruto didn't have a sharingan, so he didn't need red eyes like him. *Don't be like me…*

"Sasuke! Sasuke!" Naruto is shaking him suddenly. His voice sharpens until it rings in Sasuke's ears, and he groans out loud. "Sasuke! Oh my *fucking god."* Naruto pulls him in, and he's engulfed in his warm, orangey chakra. Naruto hugs him tight, the sun embracing the moon. "You died! You literally died, damnit!" Naruto says into his ear.

"The seal's almost finished, and you just *had* to go and be heroic! That's not like you at all!" Naruto is saying, and the words barely make sense. Sasuke had what?

And then everything that's happened falls back into place. Three years. That's how long it took Madara and the army of white Zetsu to overhaul the entire continent. Only small pockets of civilizations remained alive, but none big enough to stage a proper attack. Madara had won the moment he'd been revived. Three years, and Sasuke watched his friends fall one by one. Three years and all the hidden villages had been razed to the ground. Three long, grueling years of day to day battles, just barely outrunning, outwitting, out maneuvering their opponent. People gave up their own lives so he and Naruto had a chance to escape by mere seconds.

An island off the east coast, so small Sasuke could see end to end if he stands at the tallest peak. Only a single river running through its length. The remnants of a hidden village overgrown by weeds and huge roots of beech trees. And Naruto's symbol etched into every crevice, every brick, and embroidered on every piece of rotting old fabric they stumbled across. The barrier embedded in the very stones of the island has sprung to life when they crossed the threshold, and when Naruto had poured his chakra into the lines of etched seals, they glowed and hummed.

Alive. Breathing.

For four more months they'd hidden away in Uzushio. A maelstrom had kicked up around the island, and they were set serenely in its eye. It took Madara three months to track them here, and then another month of constant attack and the distraction of their seal making to

finally bring the barrier down. Sasuke doesn't want to think about how Uzushio fell in the first place.

Sasuke tries to sit up. A wave of nausea hits him, and he would've toppled into the dirt had Naruto not caught him. "Madara, he-"

"Retreated, for now. I put up my last barrier but it'll only hold for a couple more minutes, we need to hurry, *Sasuke!"* He says it desperately as Sasuke slumps forward in his grip. He keeps dipping back into the oblivion behind his eyes, and it's almost tempting to stay there. The only thing keeping him grounded is Naruto firmly holding him, speaking to him, *being there* for him, with him.

"Come on," Naruto presses his hands to the wound on Sasuke's side. He gasps as chakra sparks up along it, but it's still not enough. Madara had hit deep, and with something that had eaten away at Sasuke's own chakra the more he tried to fight it.

"Just… get me to the seal," Sasuke hisses through clenched teeth. "I can do this, I *have* to do this, or we're dead."

Naruto obliges, though his eyes are alight with worry. The two wobble towards the massive seal Naruto has made. It took five full hours to complete every stroke, every perfect line, all the while Sasuke had been fighting off Madara, up until that final, decisive blow. Naruto adds two more lines to the complex design. Sasuke can't even activate his sharingan to memorize the pattern. While Naruto finishes it, Sasuke sits heavily on his ankles, using a hand to support him. The ground swims in his spotty vision. If he had food in his stomach, he was sure it would be vomited back up. Sasuke has never felt this horrible in his life.

"Teme," Naruto says softly, an endearment more than an insult. It's one with enough history behind it to write an entire textbook. Sasuke used to hate the sound of it, but not anymore, not for a while. Three years and their friendship had bloomed into something more. Something desperate, something fragile yet stronger, something sweeter. Something the both of them needed, and something Sasuke didn't even know he wanted until he had it. And...he had realized a bit too late that he'd wanted this for a long, *long* time.

"Dobe."

A gentle arm encircles his shoulders. Sasuke looks up to meet Naruto's glistening blue eyes. The world fades for a moment, but not him, never him. Sasuke smiles. He can't help it. The world was crumbling around him, the countries on fire, the people nothing but memories, nothing but ghosts of a shelf, and there was Naruto. A shining beacon of hope in this desolate wasteland.

He grips the collar of Naruto's jacket. He doesn't think he can let go. Naruto starts going through the hand signs to begin the technique. Instantly, the lines start to shimmer. The air around them warps inward. There's a slight sting on Sasuke's skin, or is he dying again? It doesn't matter. He clings to Naruto like he's the only thing that's real, and as the world just starts to warp, he can hear the cataclysmic end to their time. The two step on the seal and it's like stepping into an inferno. Their hair becomes weightless. Sasuke's skin burns so much that he starts to shake.

The lightness in his chest from being held by Naruto is gone. It evaporates as his side explodes into a white hot agony that has him stumbling. He collapses into the seal, dragging Naruto with him. “You’re not dying on me, teme!” Naruto screams. “We’re right here! We’re so close!”

Sasuke reaches up, and Naruto instantly entwines their hands. He leans down and presses his forehead to Sasukes, pushing away his bangs to get at his face. Lightning crackles between them. “You’re not dying.” Naruto whispers, Sasuke can’t even tell if it’s to himself or not. He says it over and over. “You’re not dying. You’re not dying. You’re not *dying.”*

“Naruto, listen,” Sasuke says, he’s quiet, he’s always been quiet, but now he could barely speak even if he wanted to. “Listen to me, dobe.”

“I’m listening.” Naruto pries his face just far enough for them to look at each other properly. The tears are back, bright and agonizing for Sasuke to watch. He puts his other hand on Naruto’s whiskered cheek, wiping some of them away.

“I love you, idiot.”

There's silence after that. Inside the seal, the chaos happening around them is nulled into a soft buzz in their ears. Naruto stills completely, and Sasuke doesn’t think it’s those words that break him. He’s said them before. But then his eyes turn from bright and watery, to complete steel. Sasuke knows that look, and he dreads.

“I love you-” Naruto hisses back. His eyes go from blue to red, and he slams a hand down on Sasuke’s wound with enough force to push all the air from his lungs. But Sasuke can’t focus on the pain, because the world warps until there’s nothing but him and Naruto in a column of pure white. It lasts only a breath, or all of eternity.

Time seems to slow for him, and he watches, horrified, transfixed, as Naruto pours the rest of his chakra into Sasuke’s wound. Naruto’s no medic-nin. He doesn’t know a word like constraint. He’s *giving it all to him.* But Naruto was also the one powering the seal, a seal they’d worked out previously to need at least *both* of their chakra, and some of the Kyuubi’s as well.

“What are you doing!?” Sasuke screams. He tries to pry Naruto’s hands off him, but he won’t budge.

Naruto smiles up at him like there’s nothing wrong. His blond hair starts to turn to the color of blood, his blue eyes cloud into red. “I’ll see you on the other side.” He says, just before he’s burned up right in front of his eyes.

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* * *

It's the drone of cicadas and crickets that pulls him into a groggy wakefulness. He's sprawled out on a patch of soft grass, just under a massive weeping willow. One of the roots digs numbly into his back. He can barely feel it. He hears the gurgle of a river somewhere close. The splash of water over stones calming in a way he can't describe. He sucks in a careful lungful of air. It's the first in a long time that's not choked with ash and blood. It's fresh. Clean. Filled with scents of grass and moss and tree bark, a hint of wildflowers, and even the smell of something decisively *evil* around. Above him, willow leaves drape down to tickle his face. There's a slight breeze, warm and nice in the heat of summer, that created a hush through the vines. Sunlight dapples through the canopy, it's just enough that makes Sasuke squint. He's not on Uzushio anymore. This is, decisively, a Konoha forest. He sighs, deep and heavy, and feels the weight of this world settle deep into his bones. *I'm real. This place is real. And Naruto-*

Sasuke sits up so fast that he blacks out. He instantly peels up his shirt and presses a hand to where the wound should be, but instead he grazes rough scar tissue that swirls inward to a single point. He panics. "Naruto?" He calls tentatively. Sasuke spreads out his senses, looking for that achingly familiar chakra. Instead he's flooded with a fiery presence that hurts just to feel. It burns. The bushes shake, and that's all the warning he gets.

It's all the warning he needs, but the speed still catches him off guard. He tries to activate his sharingan, but all he gets is a stabbing pain that feels like a knife going right through his eyes. His attacker knocks him down, pinning him to the trunk of the tree. Claws go for his throat, and he's just fast enough to pierce a kunai through the man's palm. They're locked in place after that, though he had a forearm shoved up against his throat. Sasuke looks into blood red eyes. Ice slides down his spine, a jolt of fear gripping every nerve.

The Kyuubi, glaring down at him like he personally burned the world. Maybe he did, Sasuke doesn't know. There's blood splattered on his face that looks too much like Naruto's. Somehow, the whisker marks on his cheeks were gone, replaced by glowing red markings around red eyes. *So much red*... "This is your fault!" The Kyuubi snarls. "I should hang you with your own intestines!"

Sasuke grimaces at the thought, but he doesn't try to defend himself. He knows exactly what this is about.

"He died because of you! I hope that haunts you until the day I kill you!" A fresh wave of grief sticks in his throat. He can't breathe. But he's not going to let the Kyuubi kill him, even when there's a simmering guilt swelling inside him the longer he looks at eyes that should be blue, and hair that should be yellow. The Kyuubi had taken over once Naruto was gone, once he was *burned out of his own body* after giving everything he had to Sasuke. There wasn't a fleck of Naruto's chakra left. All Sasuke sees is a ghost, a demon inhabiting his best friend's body. It's sickening. So his own features morph into a scowl.

"I'm not the one wearing his fucking skin," he chokes out. It's enough for the Kyuubi to startle, enough for Sasuke to shove him off and leap up into the tree, to at least get a few feet between them. He can't stand it, Sasuke thinks he'll never be able to look at him again. Sasuke's foot slips on the smooth bark, and he nearly tumbles off the branch, but he holds his ground. He coughs and pulls at the collar around his shirt, but he still can't breathe properly.

He has to grip the branch he's sitting on so he doesn't fall off, and silently heaves in oxygen just to keep himself from passing out again.

The Kyuubi doesn't try to follow him up the tree. Sasuke can hear him faintly. The Kyuubi is seething. Grieving. Coils of blood red chakra waft up into the tree. It's potent enough that the leaves wither, and the sun seems to dim. It's filled with an aimless hatred that quickly mirrors Sasuke's mood. Tears prick at the corners of his eyes, and he lets them fall freely. Once they start, they don't stop. He stares listlessly through the branches of the weeping willow, out over the small river, over the forest, over to nothing.

Sasuke stays there for a long time, as still as stone. He doesn't eat. He doesn't sleep. He stares with black eyes and watches the water tumble over rocks. Day turns to night, and he stays. A vigile of some sort, but it's not honor or tradition that keeps him rooted to the spot, crouched in a tree. He's lost, utterly and completely lost. There's no going back, Naruto made sure of that, and Sasuke hadn't been able to copy the seal. It would be lost for all of eternity unless they got back the scrolls Naruto had from Uzushio. And even then, Sasuke didn't know anything about seals besides the basics. It was all Naruto's work, *all* of it. It took Naruto and the Kyuubi three months to come up with the seal work required to shoot them into a different time.

At some point, the malicious chakra dims, and then fades completely, and he doesn't move.

The Kyuubi vanishes.

Sasuke remains in the tree. The moon rises and falls. The dawn blushes pink, and the dew is burned from the grass by the sun. Up over the treetops, it rises to welcome a new day, and Sasuke remains. The morning birds fade in and out of his visuals. Some are even brave enough to hop onto his hands, opened lifelessly in his lap. They peck his skin, but seem to find him unappealing, and always fly away.

What was he supposed to do, now that Naruto wasn't here? Their plans were already unraveling, and Sasuke knows himself. He knows he can't do this without Naruto. Hell, he doesn't *want* to do it without Naruto. Naruto was his everything the moment he pulled Sasuke from his hate filled haze. He still *is* Sasuke's everything, even when he's not here. Naruto had filled his life with purpose. First it was driven by hatred, vengeance, a twisted sense of justice, and then Naruto had come to him with softer things. Love, friendship, happiness among death and chaos. He was supposed to be Sasuke's sun, while Sasuke was his moon.

And now… now Sasuke sits in a tree. Tired. Probably dying very, very slowly. It's worse than when Sasuke had killed Itachi, because at least that gave him questions. And even then, he'd done it with his own two hands. He didn't have the right to mourn that death as he does Naruto's.

It's only when a crow, of all things, decides to land in front of him with a caw. Sasuke drags his eyes slowly over the creature, and his heart drops for a moment. Thankfully, it's not one of Itachi's. Sasuke resumes his listless staring. The crow is insistent though. It caws loudly. The sound rings sharply in Sasuke ears, and he narrows his eyes at the bird. He's annoyed, and that annoyance grows within milliseconds. When the crow goes to peck his hand, he

lashes out and swats at it. Lucky for the crow, it flies away before getting whacked. Sasuke stands and watches it fly off into the forest. His muscles ache from crouching so long, and his back twinges painfully. Otherwise, he feels a bit numb.

Sasuke lets himself fall out of the tree, back onto the soft mossy floor of the forest. He checks the area for chakra on instinct, but there's no one around. What he does find is his katana, lying where he'd first woken up. Sasuke crouches down and scoops it off the ground. He checks the blade before tying it to his obi belt. There's a sturdy weight to it that has Sasuke inhaling deeply. *Right.* He thinks. *I can't sit here for the rest of my life.* An old idea surfaces, along with a grudge of hatred that's been buried, *almost* completely burned away by Naruto's good graces and love. But it's still there, Sasuke finds, and it's been festering horribly. It's not the catharsis Sasuke needs, nor the justice they deserve, but a short list of names he had collected over the years. Years that have not yet to come.

He decides, faintly, barely even conscious of it, to thank the weeping willow tree, for housing him. And the small river, for speaking to him. And he thanks the crow, for waking him.

Throat and the Golden Hair

Chapter Notes

Honestly, kinda hate this chapter, but we gotta get it out of the way for the p l o t

EDIT (1/6/22):
Twitter and Tumblr: @Whydieddemon

There's art in this fic that goes along with the story. The art will be posted onto these accounts so minor spoiler warning if you want to check it out before you've read all of this I guess? It doesn't really matter but I'd thought to mention it!!

Kakashi stares up at the slowly rotating ceiling fan in the ANBU main office. He's slouched non committedly on the couch, one leg thrown over the armrest, the other bounces rhythmically as his foot taps on the floor. Itachi is somewhere in the room, being a little shadow, packing away gear, occasionally glancing over to him like his captain's gonna *move* sometime soon. Kakashi doesn't. He hasn't taken off his armor yet, he likes to keep it on for as long as possible. His dog mask firmly hides even the hint of his expression.

Itachi slowly leaves without a word. Kakashi thanks him in his head. He's left alone in that room for at least a couple more minutes until the next patrol arrives. Kakashi and his band of merry red-eyed weirdos had finished their mission a bit earlier than anticipated, thanks to Shisui being just so *great* at a Shunshin. Made their trip much faster, and the enemy's surprise so much sweeter.

He soaks up these minutes of calm, with a heavy sigh that bleeds depression. Kakashi knows what it is that lays heavy in his heart, like lead under his skin. It doesn't make the grief any less sharp, or the waves of tiredness that drag at him. Or even the dull ache in his head that comes from unprocessed emotions, dangling just out of sight, just out of his reach. When Kakashi pauses to take a breath, to look up at the slow spin of a ceil fan, he's plagued by thoughts of those long gone.

His father. Obito. Rin. Minato and Kushina. They hang in a limbo. He's unable to let them go, but he knows they're bleeding him slowly. He takes just a moment, then decides a moment's not worth it.

"Kakashi!" Shisui swings the door open and it shudders when it hits the wall. Kakashi vaults over the couch with a kunai in his hands. The kid looks frantic. "Right now-Danzo-he-there was-"

'Slow down," Kakashi orders, "use your words, Shisui."

Shisui grimaces, then he takes a deep breath and points. “The Hokage requests your presence, immediately.” Kakashi moves before Shisui’s finished speaking. The Uchiha follows without a word. He looks like he’s seen a ghost, which was… unusual for him. Kakashi likes to think he knows the boy, but he’s just as confusing as Itachi, albeit for completely different reasons. Shisui was bright, both in personality and mind. He was confident in his skills as a shinobi, and in himself in general. But he was also a total nutcase sometimes. He's flighty and twitchy, and all though he could sense chakra with an incredibly powerful Sharingan, his own shadow could scare him.

Something incredibly bad must have happened though, Kakashi hasn’t seen him this shaken since...well...this was a first. Itachi is standing guard outside of the Hokage’s office, and he joins them when they come through the doors. The three of them bow low as the Hokage stands. He waves at them to get up.

“Hokage-sama,” Kakashi starts, then he notices there’s a body. It’s wrapped head to toe in sealing paper, about to be transported into a scroll, and probably destroyed.

“Wolf, Crow, Cat…” he addresses them each by their masks. “Just a few minutes ago,” The hokage starts, then stops. He looks grave, a tired expression hanging off his aging features. “...One of Danzo’s root shinobi found him. Dead.” Kakashi refranes from gasping out loud. He nearly bites his tongue. He nods slowly instead.

“Cause of death?”

The hokage grimaces. “A slit throat, down to the bone. While he was sleeping in his own house.” Kakashi shivers. What a way to go. “I want you and Crow to go and track down anything you can, follow any trail, any lead you find, and report it back to me. If you happen across the person who did this, bring them back. Alive.”

Kakashi nods once. Itachi quickly follows him out the door like a shadow. “Oh, Wolf,” The hokage adds. Kakashi spins on his heel, “Take Cat as well.”

“Yes sir,” he says, then internally groans. Not that he hated Shisui, but he talked. A lot. All the time. Infact, he almost never shuts up, even when Itachi just stares at him and lets him ramble on and on- it reminds him of a different Uchiha, from a different time. Kakashi doesn’t think he can handle that right now. Still, orders are orders.

Shisui falls into step with them. “This is *crazy,”* Shisui whispers, “How did they get past the guards? What do you think they used to disable the protective barrier, how did they even get past the village barrier without anyone getting alerted?” Kakashi jumped up onto a roof. Itachi followed, then Shisui, who muttered something about getting stuck with such *brooding* comrades.

Kakashi leads them to Danzo’s house, which has been taped off with a couple of root anbu guarding it from every side. They let their trio cross into the crime scene through the window. Kakashi carefully steps into the bedroom, and is instantly hit with the thick smell of blood. There’s a lot of it, mostly concentrated on Danzo’s bed, around the pillow. Nothing else looks out of place. It’s eerily still in there. With his sharingan, he can’t detect any stray chakra. He

asks Itachi to do the same, but he also doesn't get anything. Shisui inspects more of the room, looking for anything stolen or moved.

"Whoever did this was a clear pro," Shisui comments, "not a single dust particle out of place. No footprints, moved rugs, not a hair, nor any smudges of fingerprints on the door handles, or even the windowsill for that matter. Oh, besides yours, Kakashi." Kakashi rolls his eyes at Shisui's cheekiness. Now was really not the time. He takes it upon himself to summon Pakkun to help him sniff out any clues.

The little pug snuffles around the room, pausing around the foot of the bed, then again by the windows and doors. Kakashi can't smell anything himself, besides blood, but there's nothing that's decisively human. *A summons, maybe?* But when Pakkun turns in a slow circle, looking stumped, Kakashi scraps that idea as well.

"Find anything?" Kakashi asks, though he knows the answer.

"Nothing. No traces of humans *or* animals. The assassin either covered his scent, or was never here."

Shisui pulled open the window and peered down onto the street. Kakashi joined him for a second, surveying the rooftops. "Think they could've used a long range weapon? Or a kekkei genkai?"

"That's the leading theory, I assume." Kakashi rubs his chin. "Check all the roofs within eyesight of here." Itachi and Shisui scatter with quick nods. Kakashi picks up pakkun and jumps up onto Danzo's roof. They go sniffing around for a couple minutes before leaping up onto the neighboring apartment building.

"This is crazy boss," Pakkun mutters, "I've never met a shinobi who could disappear completely. There's *always* a trace, even if it's not enough to track."

Kakashi shrugs. He shuffles along the loose gravel, scanning the grounds for anything out of place. "There's a lot of weird people in the world," then, "maybe our mystery killer isn't real," he chuckles to himself. "Maybe this is all a ruse. A conspiracy."

Pakkun paws at the ground skittishly. "Don't talk like that Kakashi, you'll get in trouble."

Kakashi smiles at his dog. "Maa, they won't do anything to me for talking like this. I'm too valuable to them." Pakkun harrumphs, annoyed, but he goes and sniffs along the edge of the roof. As they both suspected, there's nothing.

Itachi comes back before Shisui, a crow nesting peacefully on his head. The one on his forearm regards Kakashi with a tilt of its little head. Then in a swift flap of wings, it nests on his own mess of hair. Kakashi is not impressed. He can see Itachi suppressing the tiniest of smiles before he clears his throat.

"There's nothing on the east side. Most of the roof tops don't have a clear view into the room anyway. The ones that do don't appear to have anything out of the ordinary. There's no residue chakra, no hairs, no scents…nothing."

Before Kakashi could open his mouth, Shisui body flickers between them. It startles the crows out of their hair, and Itachi reels back from the swirl of wind. “I found something.” Shisui says gravely. Kakashi and Itachi lean in, anticipating. Shisui glances between them through his mask, then he pulls out something incredibly thin. At first, Kakashi thought it was a piece of ninja wire.

Instead, it’s a single strand of blond hair.

Confusion is the first thing. Blond hair was incredibly rare in Konoha. The only person he knew that was blond was...Naruto. But Naruto was literally seven, and he was conversely watched by anbu. And how in the hell would he know who Danzo was?

“Are you sure this is evidence and not… Naruto running around the rooftops?” Itachi asks. He plucks the hair right from Shisui’s fingers with mild protests, and inspects it with his own sharingan like there’s something to be gleaned from it. “Because he does that. I’ve seen him when I’m on his guard.”

“The hair’s too long to be Naruto’s,” Shisui reasons. Itachi pulls it tight to measure it, then he looks up at his cousin skeptically. “I’m serious! If Naruto’s hair was that long, it would at *least* be to his shoulders!”

“Was this all you found?” Kakashi asks. He takes the hair for himself, then gives it to Pakkun.”

“It...doesn’t have a scent, boss.”

“What?” him and Shisui say at the same time. Itachi tilts his head thoughtfully.

Kakashi blinks a couple of times. Were they already at a dead end? He paces the roof for a couple minutes. Their daylight was ending fast. If they had any sort of lead, he could easily go hunting for this mysterious shinobi. But there was no direction. He could pick one at random and interrogate anyone they come across, but that seemed...wrong. And also a horribly inefficient plan. He’s debating whether they have to call it quits when an anbu in a dog mask pokes their head up to the roof.

“The Hokage sends for you. New information about the case.” Kakashi looks at the two Uchiha, then the three head for the admin building without another word.

When they reach the Hokage’s office, the sun is setting. They have absolutely nothing but one blond hair. Kakashi doesn’t want to chalk this up to another one of his failures, but that’s what it was looking to be. It’s bitter to keep failing at things that actually mattered.

The three kneel once they’re inside. Kakashi spies a large stack of files sitting on the Hokage’s desk that weren’t there before. Sitting innocently on top was a tiny piece of paper, a handwritten note scrawled on top.

“It seems our murderer believes himself justified.” The Hokage says, he gestures for Kakashi to step forward. He takes the note and reads it out loud. “The details of Danzo’s crimes against Konoha.” He lets Kakashi take the note. The scrawl is neat and tall and simple.

Undistinguished. He uses his sharingan to see if there's any hidden words or meaning, but there's nothing. The paper isn't special chakra or sealing paper, and the ink is plain; from a ballpoint pen rather than a brush and ink used in sealing.

"Was he?" Shisui asks, almost innocently. Itachi shoots him a glare through his mask. Shisui shrugs. "I'll admit it, I knew Danzo was shady as hell. I never liked him-"

"Shut your mouth," Kakashi says calmly. He doesn't want him to get into trouble. Luckily, he's obeyed for once.

The Hokage raises a brow, but continues. He flips through each file and recounts what they are. "Most of these are Danzo meeting with Orochimaru after he became a missing nin. A plan to seize power legally; get himself voted as Hokage after me, with Orochimaru backing him. And…" The hokage neatly skips over one. Kakashi pretends like he doesn't notice. "-plans to use the Jinchuuriki as a weapon to further Konoha's borders. And… These," The hokage shows him three files, all of them are of small children with Kekkei Genkai. "All of them were reported missing at some point. It seems they were hiding under our noses the whole time."

Kakashi stares down at the files. They were just pieces of paper, but they weighed heavy in Kakashi's gut. These could do some serious damage, especially things about kekkei genkai. He's sure all the clan heads were going to have a field day if they got their hands on this information. "If any of these files were to be publicized-"

The hokage stops him before he can start. He stands up and folds his hands behind his back. He turns away and stares out over Konoha with a tense expression. Kakashi can read that look a mile away. The look of fears being realized, the subtle acceptance of an uncertain future. "They already have."

A Skulk with Wild Senses

Chapter Notes

> This chapter's just total chill mode and the introduction of some mischievous characters :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke wanders through the forest without a clear goal in mind. It's been three weeks since he landed back in time. It's been four days since he's taken the first name from his list. It was the only kill he had to rush to complete. The rest he could take a little more time. It's one thing that's a bit uncomfortable to him; *having time.*

Time to sit, and to let the wounds in his soul fester just enough until he can't anymore. Unfortunately, revenge didn't give him the same rush it used to, when he thought himself right and the world wrong. He didn't linger, or savor the moment. A spin of his rinnegan in, a throat slash, a stack of important files looted, copied, and distributed, a portal out, all done within an hour. It was the cleanest kill Sasuke has ever pulled off, and *that* was what he was proud of. He hadn't even used the katana Naruto had given him. Instead it was his tanto blade, a short thing with a black handle. Simple. Effective.

Sasuke feels a presence by his ankle, and he looks down. "You again?" He huffs. The little fox stares up at him with curious dark eyes. It blinks, then lifts its muzzle to bump his shin. "I don't have food for you right now," Sasuke makes a shooing motion, which only makes the fox take a step back. It's a little orange and white thing, with triangular black ears and brown paws. The tip of its tail is snow white. It has a patch of black fur on its chest, which is different from the other two red foxes that follow him around. Speaking of which… Sasuke whirls around, just as another fox, this one with a cut in its ear, clamps its teeth on the hem of his cloak and pulls.

"Don't-" he warns. The fox's mouth tilts in a grin, then it whines and lets go. Sasuke sighs, exasperated. The cloak was something he'd found among the ruins of Uzushio, one of the few items without an Uzumaki spiral stitched into it. Instead, it was painted in soft charcoal grey waves. In certain light, hints of iridescent blues, greens, and purples could be found. " *Like crow's wings,"* Naruto had said. Once. The point was, he didn't want it ruined just yet. Though that was looking to be inevitable by the way this particular fox liked to chew on the threads.

The foxes though, was something he did not expect to happen when he was thrown back in time. He has only a vague idea of why. For the first couple of days, he'd wondered if they were just sensing the lingering Kyuubi chakra, but even after Sasuke couldn't feel even a hint of his malicious, fiery presence, they stuck around.

He's counted at least six different foxes. Three of them were red, white, and black, two were small and mottled silver with patches of white and darker grey, and the last was a pitch black. He only saw the black one following him from a distance, and whenever he turned to confront it, it would vanish over a hill or through the bushes. The rest of the bunch were not so timid, unfortunately.

Sasuke sighs and drops down into a crouch so he can scratch at the fox's ears. It allows him for only a second before getting antsy and trotting back into the forest. *They're more like cats than dogs...* Sasuke muses to himself. That would explain a lot of the Kyuubi's past behaviors, malevolent chakra demon or not, he was put in the form of a fox for a reason. *Or did all foxes take their form from him?* Things got complicated when ancient near-deities were involved.

He feels teeth graze the back of his left hand, and turns his attention to the fox with a cut in his ear. "Do you already have a name?" He asks. He doesn't get a reply besides a little whine, and the fox nips at his fingers. "No food," he says, "not even for myself." Sasuke leans back on his heels til his back hits the trunk of a tree behind him. He sits heavily between two large gnarled roots. He's done with acting graceful and contained. He's tired of being the best all the time, a cool facade that never really fitted him perfectly. He much preferred the Sasuke who used to complain about Itachi going out on missions all the time, and throwing shuriken at little wood targets, or the bark of a tree with utter concentration. It was all muscle memory at this point. He wonders if he can train that grace out of him. Be a bit more… sporadic. A bit more… Naruto.

"I'm sure you can go get something yourself," He tells the fox. It leans forward and sniffs his face. Its nose is cold and wet as it touches Sasuke's cheek, and he instantly pulls away. He pushes the fox gently from where it sits in his lap. "Please don't." The fox huffs again, then does a little spin and plops down between Sasuke's legs. Its head rests on his right knee. *I guess I'm stopping for now.*

He looks around the small area. The Konoha forests were thick and growing in the heart of summer. He can hear cicadas, and bird song, the caw of an auspicious crow that sounds just a bit too human for Sasuke's liking. The oak he rests against houses a nest of robins that flutter nervously with all the foxes swarming around. He sees a stick bug crawl up a branch, then disappear into the leaves. There's a couple wildflowers by his feet, and he picks at the long grass under his hands like a bored child.

To keep himself busy, he pulls out his katana to inspect its sharpness. He hardly had to use it since he got shot back into the past, but before that, it was a full year of hard battles fought and won every day, slashing and hacking and pushing chakra through the metal. Lightning cuts and fire, the occasional Kirin strike that put a strain on every piece of the metal that had Sasuke worried. The katana was a work of art that was not at all fitting for a shinobi. It was incredibly expensive, and ornate, and all too sentimental. After all, it was Naruto who'd chosen its decoration and meanings put into each memento.

They were things that were reminders of his precious people. Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi, and Itachi were all immortalized in tiny bits of metal and string. And while the orientations were pretty, the blade was made of a dark unpolished metal. It was scratched in some places, and

there was a lighter streak running through the middle from Sasuke's chakra reacting and turning into lightning.

Sasuke had refused and refused to take it at first. Naruto had spent a fortune on it, almost every last penny he'd saved for months. Sasuke did not understand back then, why *he,* of all people, would need something like that. Naruto, of course, broke it down in a couple sentences. *"Because, Sasuke, you think you're alone. This doesn't mean much to me, because I* know *I have these people with me. I see that look in your eye, over and over, you're suffering and you think you're alone, and I want you to have a reminder."*

So he'd taken that katana, and found it was a lot more useful than he originally thought. The charms in the handle helped to conduct his chakra into the blade, the dull metal made it so it would not reflect the moonlight. There was an array of complicated seals that helped direct chakra, hold chakra, and disperse attacks. His favorite was the seal in the tang of the blade. It made it so the katana was impossibly heavy for anyone who didn't have the corresponding tag on their person. Sasuke had his tattooed on his left inner forearm. His palm was still occupied by a faded crescent moon.

His shoulder aches with the sudden remembrance of his other seal, one that has its twin somewhere galavanting through the elemental nations, probably loosing his fucking mind. Or maybe the Kyuubi is doing nothing at all. Sasuke could feel the slight twinge whenever the Kyuubi got a bit too reckless, and was hurt as a result. He ignores it every time. Because it shouldn't be *the Kyuubi* at the end of that bond, it should've been *Naruto.* Sasuke was surprised the tattoo hadn't burned up under the Kyuubi's chakra. He wonders then, if the Kyuubi still carried around the sun tattoo on the palm of his hand.

Sasuke clenches his teeth. It hurt to think about. The fact that there were traces of a bond that was now severed for good. Ghosts. The Kyuubi was a ghost to Sasuke now, nothing but a painful reminder of what he failed to bring with him, of who he failed to protect, who died protecting him instead.

I'll see you on the other side…

Sasuke sinks lower to the ground, and the fox curled in his lap responds by yipping softly and gnawing lightly at his wrist. They're more ghosts. Mini Kyuubis. But Sasuke can't bring himself to stay mad, not when they yelp and bark and play like little kids, and roll around in the grass, and pull weird faces when Sasuke talks to them.

Sasuke spies one of the silver foxes leaping over a rock, then disappearing into a bush. When it spots Sasuke, it's ears prick forward with intent. He was almost certain that the two silver foxes were siblings. They had identical markings. The only difference was that one had a single black toe. Sasuke saw it when they were rolling around in the mud yesterday. This fox pads softly over as well, gives his shoulder a small touch of its black nose, then darts away again.

He thinks it's Naruto's chakra that they've somehow attuned to, though Sasuke himself can't even feel a hint of it anywhere. *Maybe it's something that only animals can feel, like spirits.* Not that he believes in spirits on anything. Maybe he was just desperate to have a connection with his long lost best friend and *more than friend.* Or maybe, this was something in *his* soul

that the foxes gravitated towards, and he missed it the first time around, always surrounded by snakes and hawks before he got a chance to make any connections to the place that he abandoned.

Forests were as common in Oto as they were in Konoha, but there was a suspicious lack of the fuzzy orange creatures. “Maybe I wasn’t *Hebi,* or *Taka,* all along,” Sasuke muses, he pulls lightly at the loose tufts of white fur on the fox’s tail. “Maybe I was *kitsune.”*

He pats the little fox, curled tight in a ball, its ribs rise and fall as it naps. “You’re… Mimi *,”* he decides.

He looks for the silver fox and finds her with a bird in her mouth. “You’re Gin. *”* Gin stares at him for a long while, long enough for Mimi to raise his head at the smell of birds. The fox is darting out of his lap and pouncing on Gin before she can move, and the two roll over each other and out of sight. Sasuke sighs. Foxes were trouble, weren’t they? They were clever to some degree, curious, and always, *always* getting into mischief by their own misgivings.

The red fox with a black patch on its chest makes himself known just as Sasuke settles down into a proper camp, with wards and seals to keep out any intruders, and his own little fire. He’d cleared away some sticks and leaves in between the two tree roots, and planned on sleeping there in the long grass and soft moss. “You’re… Tama.”

As the night grows deeper, the rest of the foxes he’s yet to see come closer and closer to his encampment. Sasuke only puts up barriers for humans and summons, so they easily pass over, though Sasuke has to scare Gin away from an exploding tag with a kunai. The other silver fox brought a rabbit with him, which he eventually shares with Tama. Sasuke calls him Yuki. The last red fox reminds Sasuke the most of the Kyuubi when it's in its real form. There’s hardly any white, and the orange is deeper than Tama and Mimi. There’s black only at the very tips of her ears and the pads of her feet. He calls her Aka. It’s incredibly original.

The black fox doesn’t come close. He stays by the line of trees, just barely a silhouette among the shadows. Sasuke’s tempted to call him Kage, but it feels wrong, so he smirks to himself and thinks of a funny joke. “You’re Karasu.” The fox blinks at him owlishly, then he’s gone with a rustle of bramble and flick of his ears. He watches, staying perfectly still even when the foxes start to pile up around him in small heaps of fur. Sasuke can’t remember the last time he was surrounded by so many animals that weren’t trying to actively poison him.

His snakes were great and powerful and useful, and his hawks were quite funny, but foxes… he thinks he’ll forever have a soft spot for the mischievous creatures of bad luck.

“Uzushio?” Sasuke hisses. “It’s destroyed.”

Naruto’s eyes glitter, both sad and hopeful. His eyes never seemed to go beyond that. “I’ve been trying to figure out a way to… to restart this… I don’t know! Kurama thinks I’m crazy, but I have this… hunch, okay?” Naruto stares at him, and when Sasuke fails to say anything he whispers, “It’s pulling me Sasuke, It’s been pulling me since forever, I just didn’t know it.”

Sasuke studies him for a good long moment. They're running, but the ground is flat enough that he's not paying much attention to it. Behind them, the last of the Konoha forest burns. The sky is almost black. Soot float around them in a haze. There's no green left on the continent, it's all been burned or flattened by the march of armies gathering. Or by one man, one Madara who sees himself the destroyer of the world. Sasuke lets out a measured breath, a puff of fire escapes him. "Okay, if that's what you think."

"It's the only place left and...and Kurama says he knows things about it. Because he knows Uzumaki better than anyone alive today."

Sasuke snorts. "How the hell-"

"He says he knows because Kushina and Mito knew. He has a lot of their memories, as well as his own since before shinobi villages even existed. It would be stupid not to consider it."

Sasuke scowls, "oh, I'm considering it."

"Let's go then," Naruto starts to veer eastward, but Sasuke catches him quickly.

"Let's go north first. Madara and the zetsu's are still close. If they catch a lead, then we'll never get there."

Naruto nods once. Sasuke continues, "we'll keep going for tonight, then we'll fly into Lightning country through Frost, and then *across the sea."*

Naruto snickers. "That's a solid plan. Exhausting for you mostly. Can you run that far on the ocean after a summon like Garuda?"

Sasuke lifts a shoulder. He's been doing fine this entire time. "We'll find out."

Naruto barks a laugh that's twinged with a bit of grief. He never loses that bitter edge to anything he says or does nowadays. It hangs around him. Sasuke hates it. "Well, I don't want to bridal carry you into my ancestral home, I think that's a bit too much."

"Too much? When has anything been 'too much' for the great Naruto Uzumaki?"

His laugh is bright, fleeting, it burns through him and it's gone. Sasuke takes it in, soaks in the short lived sunlight Naruto creates, and wishes selfishly that he'd laugh a little more, a little softer, a little quieter. Just for him. But it's always gonna be like this. When they're the only ones left, and the world's on fire, Naruto can only spare a second, before he remembers. Sasuke wishes they could forget about it all. But Madara won't stop until they're dead, until the whole world is dead.

"Kurama tells me that Uzushio is more than just a place."

Sasuke eyes Naruto skeptically, an eyebrow raised. Naruto catches on and scowls. If they weren't running, he might have shoved him. "It sounds stupid I know, but...let me have this one."

“It’s not...stupid.” Sasuke reigns in his expression. Naruto needs this, he realizes. He needs something to hope for, when everything else is ashes in their mouths. “We’ll go and see it for ourselves.”

Naruto nods, “A place that’s more than a place.”

When Sasuke awakes, it’s all at once, without a single twitch of his muscles. He’s aware, sharply, irritably, that he’s surrounded by warm balls of fur, and half a dozen fluffy tails swirling over his face and chest. There’s paws resting just under his chin, a wet nose pressed to the side of his cheek. He *swears* he can feel the side of a canine tooth rubbing against the top of his head. He rises slowly, stiffly, so his foxes have enough time to startle themselves awake and jump away with annoyed barks. Mimi grabs onto the hem of his cloak and tries to play tug-of-war, but Sasuke snuffs that quickly with a growl of his own.

“You need to quit that,” He snaps at him. He gets a sly grin and a cackling howl in return. Aka has already darted away, carefully avoiding the exploding tag with the kunai buried next to it. Sasuke rises fully, disturbing the twin silver foxes by his feet. He brushes himself off, does a few stretches, then sinks back down to scatter the remains of his fire. He’s surprised no one’s bothered him yet.

He killed Danzo after all.

He looks at Gin, who grins at him. “There’s no way I was *that* clean,” he says to her. “I may be good but...but my clan’s still alive, Itachi, Shisui, my father and mother… surely *someone* will suspect an Uchiha…?” His stomach lurches at the thought of a different Uchiha taking the fall for something he did.

“The files were a safeguard,” He reasons. Gin pricks her ears and tilts her head curiously, “there’s no *way* the clan heads will come to an agreement about the killer now. The council’s reach will also loosen...the Hokage will have to take more responsibility…or…” He picks at a wildflower and flicks it between his fingers. Gin tries to snap at it, he lets her. “Or it all goes to shit and they’re actually hunting me right now.”

Gin chortles in the back of her throat, then rolls over playfully, still swiping at the flower. Sasuke lets her have it, then kicks leaves over the scorch mark left on the ground. He goes about taking down his barriers at a slow pace, thinking all the while. Truth be told, he didn’t expect to be tossed so far *back.* He stopped the massacre of his clan, for one. After that, he didn’t know which targets were up for grabs next.

Orochimaru was tempting. More than tempting. But he was also an illusive bastard, and probably thick in the Akatsuki garbage right around now. Did Sasuke have to kill him? He was sure that Orochimaru’s motives were always more selfish than world domination. He wanted immortality. But Edo Tensei... that was the first stage to Madara’s reincarnation, and *that cannot, will not, happen.*

He’s brooding over his list, pulling smoke bombs from the line of trees, when he spots Karasu poking his head out from between two yew bushes. His nose twitches at him faintly.

Sasuke stops what he's doing and regards him curiously. This was the closest Karasu has gotten to him, just only a few steps away. He could brush the tip of his nose with his katana if he stretched his arm out. However, as soon as Sasuke takes a step forward, he disappears. Sasuke can't even see the swish of his tail as he vanishes into thin air. It sends a shiver down his spine. Is Karasu an illusion? A ghost? Or just incredibly fast?

He doesn't let himself dwell on it for long. Sasuke removes the rest of his seals fast, leaving no traces of his presence besides the smell of fox and the tang of metal in the air as he leaves. Five foxes trot after him in single file down the small game trail he finds.

Sasuke turns to Aka, who walks so close to him he's nearly tripping on her every other step. The red fox looks up at him. She's intelligent, Sasuke can tell. "Aka," he calls, and watches her black tipped ears twitch up. *You know your name? Or at least the name I gave you?* "Can you… scout ahead?" There's a pause, Aka doesn't move from his side. Sasuke deflates, feeling a bit stupid. And then, and *then,* without warning, Aka darts down the path, pausing every couple of steps to peer into the forest. She's...she's doing what Sasuke asked. She's *scouting.* Sasuke's eyebrows lift off his forehead. *"Holy shit,"* he whispers.

It's Tama who takes Aka's place, and trips him almost immediately while his attention is on the other fox. The whole group burst into high pitched barks that sound a lot like mocking laughter. It feels intentional, and he glares down at Tama, who flatten his ears and pouts like a dog. Sasuke *swears* he sees Gin and Yuki mimic him falling over.

"You're not summons, right? I would've known…" He says to them. Mimi and Tama get into a play fight that has them rolling into a nearby puddle, splashing mud all over Sasuke's cloak and Gin's silver fur. "If not summons, then what are you?"

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!

here are the fox's names: (aka my google translations lol)

Mimi = Ear (fox with a cut ear)
Tama = ball (ish?) (Fox with a black mark)
Aka = red (most red fox that looks like the kyuubi)
Gin = silver (Silver fox with black toe)
Yuki = snow (silver fox)
Karasu = crow (black fox that's not around much) (Sasuke thinks its a joke bc of his brother's crows)

The Rivers and Sand

Chapter Summary

Sasuke goes West.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a plethora of small towns in river country, cutting across small streams and between fields of rice paddies. Sasuke passes through each one that crosses his path, but he doesn't stay for long. Some of them are no more than a cluster of huts for farmers and the occasional traveler. Others span a few miles up and down large rivers, with bridges spanning the water and busy, cobbled roads. Merchants tip their hats to him when they pass, locals stare out their windows with a suspicious glint in their eyes. As for shinobi, there's plenty, and Sasuke pretends he doesn't notice their suspicious glances as they clock in any dangers around them. Sasuke doesn't care, he's the same as them.

His foxes, to everyone's surprise and horror, follow him into the towns, even when civilians and merchants and shinobi alike try to shoo them away. It was drawing quite a lot of attention. At this point, Sasuke could care less. He's already gotten away with murder. There's not a lot of people at the moment that can challenge him if they *do* try to pick a fight. And the ones that can, he's looking for them anyways. So the foxes follow, nipping at the edge of his cloak and getting under his feet, and he continues on as if they're not there. It's still shocking to him when they follow his commands every once in a while. Aka is his go-to scout now, she's the most outgoing. The rest don't like to leave his sight. He hasn't seen Karasu since the Konoha border, but Sasuke's certain he's being shadowed by that mysterious fox.

It's in one of the bigger-small-towns that he restocks some supplies he hasn't had since he landed on this side of time. Scrolls and ink for one. He'd never needed them before, but now he was on a mission, one that would encounter bodies. And even time travelers needed a bit of cash. He wanted Akatsuki's heads more than anything, and those heads also came with price tags on return to their villages. Sasuke thinks it's a bit of a funny twist of things. He's a bounty hunter now, he guesses, that hunts other bounty hunters.

He's stopped at a weapon's shop, far off the main roads and deep in a jumble of stone buildings. The man selling is old, with a thin face and a wispy grey beard. He's got a myriad of crisscrossing scars all over his face and arms. His eyes are scrutinizing and wary. He's a shinobi. Or was. There's another customer browsing idly between the shelves, a konoha hitai-ate hanging loosely from his neck. Sasuke has never seen this particular Konoha shinobi, and he wonders briefly if the man died before the massacre. Maybe this was his last mission. Or maybe he died when Orochimaru attacked.

“No hitai-ate?” the shop owner asks when he notices him. “But you’re definitely a shinobi.”

Sasuke lifts one shoulder noncommittally just as Gin and Aka nose the door open and bound over to him. He looks at them scathingly.

“Foxes eh? Are they your summons? I’ve never seen fox summons…”

He turns his attention back to the shop owner. “No. More like pests,” is all Sasuke is willing to offer on that front. He changes the subject immediately, keenly aware of the other shinobi, whose interest spikes at the mention of foxes. “I need blank sealing scrolls, ink, and brushes.”

The man only nods, glancing at him as he turns from the counter to collect his items. Sasuke spies Aka about to snap something up in her mouth and he scowls at her. “Don’t you even think about it,” He hisses at her. Aka’s ears flatten and she slinks away.

“They listen to you,” The man says, half astounded. “But they’re not summons?”

Sasuke doesn’t respond to that, just hands over the money. The ex-shinobi carefully counts out the bills slowly. He keeps looking up to stare at Sasuke, then at the two foxes. Sasuke mulls over his next words carefully. He needs information, but does he want a konoha shinobi to know what he’s looking for? *Fuck it, subtly wen out the window the moment I wandered in with foxes trailing me.* “Have you seen any shinobi wearing black cloaks with red clouds on them? Some might have scratched hitai-ate,” he says lowly. He spies the konoha shinobi as he drops a kunai and catches it before it can clatter on the ground.

The man pauses, just enough that Sasuke notices before he relaxes again, hands flipping through bills like nothing happened. Sasuke raises an eyebrow. “So you have?”

“Hn,” the man grunts. There’s a look on his face that’s part smug, part terrified. Sasuke waits. He’s not very good at waiting. It almost drove him mad when they were trapped on Uzushio, and all he could do was wait, and read, and swing his katana at the trees and watch them heal themselves. Being idle makes him itch. But he can wait long enough to make another shinobi break under pressure. And he thinks he’s good at being intimidating, though that was hard when he had five foxes that constantly stuck their teeth through the hem of his cloak.

The man breaks anyway. “I saw someone. A couple hours ago. He was traveling west like you. He was wearing that cloak, and a hat with a bell.”

His first thought is Itachi, but that makes so sense. His second is Kisame. Could it be the missing kiri-nin? When did Kisame join?

Sasuke nods slowly. The konoha shinobi quietly exits without buying anything. *There’s no way that man is stupid enough to go after an S-class criminal, right?* Sasuke can only hope he doesn’t scare off his prey. The man finally hands over his items, twelve blank sealing scrolls, a small pot of black-blue ink, and a thin brush. Sasuke thanks him quickly, then leaves in a flurry of fox fur. He takes to the roofs as soon as possible, earning him a plethora of complaints from his fuzzy companions.

He catches the Konoha-nin down the street, trying to high tail it out of there. It's not hard to get the drop on him, he has to be a chunin, no jonin could miss the red creatures flooding the streets when he enters an area. Sasuke snakes out a hand and grabs the man by the back of his flack jacket. It earns him a kunai that he catches on his finger before it can pierce right through his eye. He glares at the man. At least he's got good aim. On second inspection, this man is more like a teen, late teen, maybe 17 or 18. Sasuke runs through all the ninja he knows, but still comes on a blank.

"Who are you?" The man snarls at him. Sasuke lets him go, and the man takes a couple leaps backward, shuriken dancing on a wire, ready between his fingers.

"Are you going after the s-class?" Sasuke asks simply. "Because he's *mine." I just need to know…*

The kid straightens up, eyebrows furrowing. "I...no. I'm not…"

Sasuke nods curtly. "Right." He turns to leave, jerking his head at his foxes to follow, when the kid calls back.

"Wait!"

He sighs. Of course. Things were never this easy with Konoha-nin. Sasuke looks over his shoulder.

The kid's pointing at Aka. "You said they're not summons, then what are they? How are you controlling them?"

Sasuke narrows his eyes, then to be snide he says, "Konoha should know first hand what happens when you try to control a fox."

* * *

It's Sasori he finds hanging around River Country, of all people. He's almost tempted to not start a fight. There's an awkward moment when Sasuke first spots him, cloaked in Akatsuki black and red clouds, a triangular hat with a bell sitting on his low head. Sasori also eyes him with a menacing glare, one that would cow nearly anyone. Sasuke knows about him though, knows about his puppet exteriors, and his only human bits left, the thing he'll have to get at if he wants to win. Sakura loved to recount this fight on the odd night of rest, when the Konoha nine would get 'mildly' drunk around a campfire and regale in the times that they won, and none of the things they lost could seep through that thick haze of triumph and alcohol.

Sasuke doesn't want to fight right now, even though he'd technically been tracking him all across River country. He took it slowly, absorbing the atmosphere as much as he could. He's been traveling with his foxes for a couple of days, and those days have been peaceful and mostly quiet. He watched the sunrise every morning, and studied the way gold light filtered

through the branches of the canopy. And he found he liked the sound of a brooke bubbling over small rocks, and the way the wind swished gently through the leaves. And he didn't want to break that calm with a fight, even though every action he takes has been leading up to this moment.

So they stop, and they size each other up. Sasori speaks first, gruff and sharp, metal on wood and vocal cords made of chakra strings, "What do you want, *brat?"*

Brat. Sasuke involuntarily stiffens at that, like it's been trained into him to do so. That's what the Kyuubi liked to call humans. Brats. No matter if they were kage or children, they were all *brats* to him. It's strange hearing that word in the mouth of a person and not a bijuu the size of a small mountain.

"Sasori of the red sand. I'm here to kill you."

That's all it takes.

Things get hectic a bit too fast. All it takes is a whirl of his sharingan, and Sasori decides that he needs about three dozen puppets at his disposal, all laced with varying degrees of poisons. Each one is unique, and causes all kinds of destruction. The first thing that gets leveled are a dozen trees as blades of chakra slice through them like butter. Sasuke takes a second to make sure his foxes have scrambled before he takes a leap and starts slicing through puppets, chakra strings, and a large range of weapons.

"Okay, Sasuke," He mutters to himself, "you can do this." The fight's over before he can really get into it, but he's got bigger fish to fry. Fighting day to day, life over death, for a year and a half has made him weary in a way that ends battles before he can be drawn short on his strings. And Sasori, for all his flair and numbers, is no hoard of white zetsu, or an elusive dimension whirling maniac.

He takes a swerve to the left, lets a senbon pierce through the end of his cloak, clean through and leave snags of black threads, before he's close enough to do any real damage. Sasori's quick, but he's no Madara, he's no *Itachi.* Sasuke's katana pierces through wood and metal springs, straight through the first layer, then the second, he can feel it when lightning over charges the last human piece to him, and Sasori jolts, his mechanical eyes startled with enough expression that Sasuke can believe they're real too.

"Who...are you?" It's growled into his ear with a hint of desperation, like he couldn't believe that he'd been bested so quickly.

Sasuke takes a deep sigh, then slowly pulls away. When he takes the katana with him, there's no blood. Sasori falls forward, his puppets give a lurch before they begin to crash out of the sky like meteors.

"I'm...not from around here." Sasuke shrugs while he tucks away his katana. "You've been a pawn to bigger plans. Plans that I can't let happen."

Sasori chuckles without any humor. It's a cold sound, clattering in his wooden teeth. "Of course. I knew, and I didn't care."

“You understand then.”

“Unforchunately,” Sasori wheezes out, then he drops to the ground, and remains still.

It doesn’t take long for Sasuke’s foxes to come out of the woods with their ears pricked forward and tails wagging, like they hadn’t just witnessed a murder. Aka trots right up to them, avoiding all the abandoned puppets as she goes, and perches herself on a sliced up tree stump. She hisses at Sasori’s body, and that’s all the others need to leap over wooden and metal bodies. Gin growls and promptly tries to remove Sasori’s puppet head with her needle-like teeth.

“Hey!” Sasuke snaps at them, “he’s worth a lot of money! Don’t scratch it with your dumb fangs!” He has to physically pull Gin up by her scruff. Yuki yips at his heels, annoyed by the manhandling of his twin. Mimi takes a snap at his own cloak, like always, and Sasuke scowls at him.

“Damn foxes…” He hisses to himself. Sasuke takes a moment to look around the damaged woods they’d been in. Sasori had been on the main path out of the village, and it wouldn’t take long for someone to come wandering by. The area around them had basically been flattened, and Sasuke’s last minute lightning jutsu had left some pretty interesting scorch marks cutting through the dirt.

First things first; the body. This wasn’t like Danzo, which was to prove a point and send a message. Sasori was Akatsuki, an s-class missing nin from Suna. He could bring in his corpse for money, and hopefully win some trustworthiness from at least *one* hidden village. He’s not too sure what’s going on with Konoha and him. It’s not like he wants to return anytime soon, Uchiha or not. He knows it’ll hurt beyond belief, and he’ll feel...trapped. That place had always felt stifling in some way. He can’t remember when it was not, all those years ago. He wonders if his younger self thinks the same, or if it's ever crossed his mind before. Those memories from the *before* appear at the edges of his mind, and when he tries to chase them down they vanish.

“If you’re not gonna help me, then scram,” Sasuke says to the foxes. He gets a chorus of mocking laughter in return. He’s yet to write the proper seals for bodies, (do they count as bodies, or equipment?) so he has to take a good minute to fling open blank scrolls and meticulously create mass transport scrolls. He turns to Aka. “Could you please help me gather the puppets, just don’t scratch them?” He asks as gently as he can. To sweeten the deal, he adds, “I’ll feed you barbequed pork next time we’re in a town.”

It’s all they need to get going. With five extra helpers piling puppet bodies around the decimated woods, it goes faster. Sasuke seals away Sasori’s main puppet body first, then works on the more *precious* puppets that he comes across. He knows Sasori had a tendency to use real bodies, and any others he burns with Amateseru. It’s the first time he’s used his black flames since he got here, and it stings just a bit. A drop of blood leaks out from his left eye. Sasuke blinks it away. He doesn’t miss the concerned tilt of Aka’s head, or how Mimi whines at him. He’s almost convinced they care about him.

“You’ll mourn me when I’m gone?” He asks Yuki and Gin, who sit and play with the tassels on the ends of his scrolls. Sasuke quickly rolls them up and clips them closed with seals made

of his own blood. “I doubt it,” He grins at them. They grin back.

* * *

Sasuke hates the desert. He finds his foxes hate it too, judging from how their ears flatten against the wind, and how they flex their claws into the loose sand. Aka braves it the longest, while the rest try to cower under Sasuke’s cloak, as if the black material would relieve them from the harsh clear skies and summer sun. They weren’t built for scorching heat and dusty wind, and neither was Sasuke. He’d taken Sasori’s hat for himself, and tucked all his long black hair under it to keep it off his neck. Though that did little to relieve the fact that *he was covered in black clothes and cooking alive.* Sasuke’s been through worst conditions. The blizzards in Frost Country, and the upper parts of Iwa are a force to be reckoned with, but there was something slow and torturous about slugging through the desert with a pack of droopy foxes trailing him. He makes a decision to stop at the nearest outpost or village or *anything* to grab a different set of clothes.

After a couple of grueling hours, he takes shelter under a small alcove of sandstone, his foxes graciously plopping down in piles of fur around him. They’re all panting up a storm. Aka’s fur is covered in so much dust, she appears tan instead of red.

“Scratch this, we’re traveling by night.” It’s something he should have thought about *before* they entered the desert. It must’ve slipped his mind after his deceivedly peaceful trek through River country that ended with a name off his list, and a body in a scroll. He starts to set up a small camp for himself and the foxes while they wait out the sunshine. He doesn’t have much, but he takes his outer cloak and pins it with kunai to cover half the entrance. He grimaces when he sees the faint wave patterns glittering in the harsh sun. *This cloak is ruined anyway...* He reasons.

“Aka, keep watch?” Aka whimpers, then flops over onto her back. He sighs. Right. They’re tired, and not his summons or playthings. They’re foxes, and if they don’t want to do something, they won’t. Sasuke peers around the collection of rocks, but he sees no one over the sand dunes and flat bits of dusty, cracked stones. There’s no cover for miles in any direction. No where for an enemy to hide besides underground.

Sasuke sets up quick illusion seals. He carves them straight into the rock. Paper seals or tags would fly away in this wind. They’re a bit crude, but they work fine in making Sasuke’s harsh black cloak appear to be a pile of sandstone. It’s while he’s carving the last one, that he spies a friend peeking over a dried shrub bush at him.

The first thing he notices are the ears, so wide and tall they take up more than half its head, and almost all its height. They’re triangular, and flick around as Sasuke shifts on his heels. Beady black eyes, round as marbles, watch him. A tiny black nose twitches, whickers flicking. It’s tiny, about the size of a skinny cat. He guesses its native to the desert, with fur a creamy white, like the sand at the corners of a mirage. Sasuke’s never seen anything like it before.

But it’s, desievely, a fox.

Sasuke pretends to ignore it at first. He turns away and makes a show of slowly crawling back into his makeshift camp, keeping a keen eye on how the mini-fox's ears flick forward with interest. He's not sure if this fox will be like his from Konoha, or how his foxes will react to a new member, one that they could *easily eat.* Sasuke settles down, sees a flash of tan by the entrance, but the mini-fox doesn't dare enter the darkened alcove.

Yuki, the closest one to the entrance, also spots the newcomer, and the two have a little staring contest. Sasuke can see the muscles bunching under silver fur, and right before Yuki can make up his mind, Sasuke slowly reaches out and ruffles him between the ears. It breaks the weird tension, and the mini-fox disappears behind a boulder.

"That's not prey," Sasuke whispers.

For the rest of the evening, he stares out into the desert, planning out his route, and making sure his supplies are organized. It's dusk when Aka leads Tama and Gin out of their alcove to hunt. Sasuke doesn't know what they'll find, maybe rattlesnakes or lizards, an odd vulture. He's got some dried meat if they start to starve. For himself, he has enough rations for at least a week. He should get to Suna before then, though. Sasuke hopes, belatedly, that they don't come back with the mini-fox between their teeth.

The three don't return until the moon is peaking just over the dunes. Sasuke starts to take down his cloak, a cold wind ripples through the sands. It's enough to make him shiver. Aka padds over in front, with a dead viper hanging limp in her mouth. Sasuke scoffs at the smugness in the lilt of her mouth. Gin has a hawk, which makes Sasuke wince, and he wonders stupidly if they're sending him a subtle message about his previous animal companions. But then Tama bounds forward, displacing them both with a mouthful of lizards that he promptly spits out and lets the other two take from his pile. Gin shares her bird with Yuki, like usual.

He'll always be fascinated by his foxes, he thinks. They're nothing like him. *They're like Naruto. They should be Naruto's...* the thought hurts. It's like this universe had wanted Naruto, had been *expecting him,* and when Sasuke came through to the other side instead of him, all the things that were for Naruto were reluctantly passed to him. And he knows that feeling well and good. That reluctance towards the shadow of a shinobi, the moon to Naruto's sun.

Sasuke presses down on the moon tattoo that would never come off. Just another one of Sasuke's many reminders. And the reminder on his shoulder blade would still twinge every once in a while. It hurt like a bee sting. Just enough to be annoying when it happened, but not enough that he needed to do anything about it. The Kyuubi, running around with Naruto's body, Naruto's *seals* still etched into his skin—a sun of his hand, and something on his right shoulder blade—unconsciously pulling chakra through it every now and again. Sasuke wasn't curious enough to go seeking out what the Kyuubi was doing, but he thought about it sometimes.

He thinks more about the day they crash landed in that konoha forest, and how he saw everything *Naruto* burn right out of him, leaving a shell, leaving the Kyuubi, with bloody red eyes and ruby colored hair. Naruto was gone, but he wasn't. He couldn't be. Sasuke saw him in the sun. And in the trail of foxes scurrying after him as they finished their meal. He saw

blue in Aka's amber eyes, and orange and black in their fur. It hits him like a ton of bricks that Naruto used to *dress like a red fox.* And of *course* he would.

The universe wanted Naruto, and it got Sasuke. That'll have to do.

* * *

He uses the stars to travel west. He passes a checkpoint set up by Suna-nin. There's no one manning it, so Sasuke snoops through the supplies hidden under the stone floorboards. It's actually Yuki who first discovered it. He did a jump that sent his nose crashing against stone with little to no regard for his own self preservation. Sasuke had chuckled, the rest of the foxes had laughed, outright. They stay there for the day.

On the second night, Sasuke spots the mini-fox again, this time bounding along with another right on its tail. This one a slightly darker, with a soot colored stripe running down the spine of its tail. Sasuke doesn't stop, just watches as the two check them out. They run up along a dune, while Sasuke remains in a valley. They have the high ground on them, which Sasuke finds vaguely amusing, given their tiny size. Aka seems interested in them too. When she runs up to meet them though, they scatter, like they were nothing but a mirage on the sand. Aka spends a good half hour trying to sniff them out before she gives up. Tama has to pull her tail to her moving again.

It's not until the fifth night that the mini foxes get close enough that Sasuke can get a good look at the both of them. They run with him right at his heels for a couple of miles, and they sit on the stones at Sasuke's eye level when they stop to rest. Sasuke offers some dried meat as a gift, and the two happily accept. For him and foxes, it's as easy as that.

"Kurome," he names the lighter one, "and Hokori," is the darker one. They run with him from then on. They're good, Sasuke muses, at stealing food from the other foxes and getting under their paws. Sasuke finds that Kurome in particular is excellent at playing hide and seek, and doesn't mind burying himself in the sand to escape the wrath of the larger animals.

Hokori finds his home on Sasuke's shoulder. The fox ends up there more days than not, and when Sasuke is going particularly fast, he lets the two hang out in the pockets of his cloak, much to the whining of the larger foxes. It leads to an interesting night of travel, when Aka decides that *she* wants a ride as well, and promptly jumps on Sasuke's shoulders. He goes down instantly and is swarmed by sandy paws and excited barks. He lets them dust up his hair and cloak, and he shoves them around a bit until they settle.

"You're too big to carry, Aka." Sasuke reasons once all of them had their turn at leaping onto his shoulders. Technically, he probably could carry all of their weight, but they're a bit too bulky to stack on his shoulders comfortably.

It's the seventh dawn when he reaches the outskirts of Suna. He's greeted by guards, a plethora of them dotting the tiered layers of Suna's walls. They watch him with scrutinizing

eyes from at least a mile away. They follow his steps, and hide behind the sparse rocks. He can sense them shifting under the sand, or pretending to be heat mirages glittering just on the horizon. Sasuke can pinpoint their commander, a woman with most of her face covered by dusty fabric bandages, tied tight all the way to the bottoms of her eyes. Her hair is a dull brown. She wears a huge fan on her back, remarkably similar to Temari's. She stands with her arms crossed pointedly, a serious scowl in the set of her brows.

"What's your purpose in Suna?" She asks when he comes to a careful halt at the base of the entrance. It's a long chasm split right into the rock, perfect for ambushing anyone who's not permitted to enter. "And don't try and lie, shinobi. I can tell what you are from miles away."

"I've come to collect a bounty." He says quietly. Aka barks as confirmation. It draws her attention for a moment. She scans the rest of five around his heels while Sasuke talks, "-someone I assume Suna has wanted dead for a long time."

The woman raises an eyebrow. There's a metal ball pierced through its center. "Oh?" Her eyes keep flicking from him to the foxes now, then they lock on Hokori, his head tucked just under Sasuke's chin.

"Sasori of the red sand." The name has its intended effect. It's a slight shift, a tensing of muscles and a twitch of her eyes, and the eyes of all the shinobi within earshot.

"If you're lying-" The woman starts.

Sasuke unclips the body scrolls at his hip. "I gathered his main puppet body, along with around fifty of his most valuable puppets. If that's not enough, then I'll take these elsewhere. Sell them on the black market or-" It's an easy bluff. Effective because it's what anyone else in his situation would do. *If I didn't know what I know, then I would. In a heartbeat.*

"No!" The woman throws her hands out like that'll stop him, "We'll take you to the Kazekage, directly."

One of her comrades jumps down from his perch on the stone cliff face. "I'll escort you. Please dismiss your summons and come with me." He gestured to follow through the split.

Sasuke turns to face Aka. *There's no way this is gonna work.* "Stay." He says. It doesn't work. Aka pads after him with a smug look on her face, like she knows she's being an ass. And where Aka goes, the rest follow. Hokori and Kurome make themselves scarce inside Sasuke's cloak.

The woman stares at him like he's a lunatic. "They can't come with you. Can you not dismiss them?"

Sasuke gives her a flat look. "They're wild, not summons."

She deflates. "You're kidding."

"Nope."

"Well. *Can't* you control them? Send them away, or we'll have to."

Sasuke clicks his tongue. “Touch them, and you’ll be the first to witness how I killed your double S-class missing nin.”

“Is that a threat?” The woman snarls.

Sasuke turns to her. “It’s a promise.”

“Hey!” her comrade waves a hand in front of her. “We can bring the foxes. It’s okay, as long as they stay with us. Bring an extra squad to tail.”

“Fine.” The woman spits, still glaring at Sasuke. He glares right back, hand already halfway to his katana.

“Sir, come with me now, and keep your...pets...close.”

“Hn.” Sasuke jerks his head at Aka, and she trots up to his heels, tail high in the air. “Yeah that’s right, you win again, *brat.”* He tests the word, watches as Aka laughs her mocking laugh. The man smiles at him warily when they fall in step behind him. Sasuke keeps his eyes upward, watching as suna shinobi dart above them, they train katana and shuriken and poisoned senbon on him.

They’re almost at the end of the split when Sasuke spots something dark flicker against the harsh desert sky. It whirls passed, a streak of black, and then it's gone again. But Sasuke sees, even without his sharingan, and he feels ice slide down his spine despite the heat. And suddenly, it’s not just ice he feels. It’s a trickle of fear, a taste of malice and fire on the back of his tongue. It’s Ash in his throat and prickling lightning just under his skin. And he’s been a fool, letting himself grow attached to *foxes* of all things.

Because it was Karasu he saw streaking through Suna’s cliffs with two bushy white tipped tails, and a trail of purple fire blazing from his paws.

~ Some Art ~

Chapter End Notes

Things are gonna pick up from here on out and its gonna get a bit non-linear as well, so enjoy!

Fox names: (also more google translate ehe-)

Kurome = Black Eyes (Lighter fennec fox)
Hokori = Dust (Darker fennec fox)

In Memories of Better Names

Chapter Summary

Sasuke collects his bounty and finds a couple of ghosts along the way.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you all so much for continuing to read this fic! I've got a lot planned but the pace of uploads will start slowing as the plot gets more complicated!

Thank you for the comments and Kudos as well, I really appreciate it! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Suna shinobi must've sensed his discomfort. The man whirls around to walk backwards, just as they enter the city proper. Sasuke never remembers much about Suna, except for the strange, almost insect-like architecture, and the haze of floating sand, thanks to Gaara. There's also the faint smell of blood anywhere they go. Also Gaara.

Maybe it's those things that the shinobi thinks bothers him. "The smell from...well.. It won't bother us, so don't let it bother you. You're a shinobi, you should be used to it."

"I am…" Sasuke says distractedly. He aims a steely look at Mimi, who clamps his teeth happily on the hem of his cloak and continues to carry it like it's a train on a fancy dress. He scowls a bit meanly at him, still feeling slightly betrayed by Karasu. *Karasu's more than just a wild fox. He's a spirit. He could be a summons, or something more than that. And if he's a fox spirit, what are the rest of them? Are they spirits too? Are they spying on me? Are they hiding their true nature? Of course they are! They're foxes!*

The Suna shinobi leads him directly through the village. The deeper they go, the taller the buildings. They walk into a courtyard blessed with shade, pass just under the cliff walls where Sasuke sees a dozen different caves and tunnels dug through the stone. They skirt around where Sasuke senses death, and the smell of blood thickens just a bit. Sasuke latches onto it immediately, he feels that prickle of malice, but it's not the Kyuubi. It's not enough chakra to be the Kyuubi. Sasuke looks around. Gaara is close, and he can tell just by the way the Suna shinobi starts getting twitchy.

"Let's… take a detour through here," he jumps gracelessly up a building. Sasuke takes a look at his foxes, then follows much to their annoyance. He keeps an eye on them as they race

through the streets, Aka in the lead with her head tilted to him. The Suna Shinobi is still fidgeting, landing hard on his heels, and nearly toppling over on every step.

Sasuke decides to test his luck. “What’s back over there that’s so terrifying?”

The man makes a choked sound, but doesn’t answer. The rest of their trip is silent, all the way up until they jump down in front of the Kazekage’s building. There’s two chunin guards, and a plethora of Suna Anbu hanging out in the shadows. The guard squad that’s been tailing them vanish around the edges of his vision when he turns to ruffle Aka between the ears. The red fox wags her tail happily.

“We’ve let them through this far, but I seriously doubt you can take them any farther,” his guide tells him sternly.

“Have your chunin stop them, if they can, but remember, not a scratch.” Sasuke warns. He sits on his heels to get to Aka’s eye level. “I’m serious, stay here until I get back. And if you see Karasu, bite off his extra tail, will you?”

Tama and Mimi chortle while Aka yips happily. Gin and Yuki roll around in a sand patch under an awning, shaded from the sun. his two mini-foxes stay hidden, and he lets them. He passes between the chunin guards, and watches as they slowly face the rambunctious animals making a mess of their courtyard, horror in their expressions as clear as the summer sun.

“This way,” The shinobi leads him through a quick maze of narrow hallways and flights of stairs cut right from the sandstone. Sasuke remembers this. He went to Suna once on a diplomatic mission. It was Gaara who’d been Kazekage, no longer a bijuu and better because of it. Though it was never Shikaku’s fault, Naruto had explained in great detail. It was the unfinished seal that let the bijuu’s hatred meld into Gaara’s, and their minds meshed dangerously, and Gaara’s horrendous upbringing only solidified him into full bred crazy. Sasuke wants to get at least a glimpse of this Gaara before he leaves.

He doesn’t know why, exactly. Gaara had been one of Naruto’s best friends, but he’d never been that close to Sasuke himself. They… tolerated each other. Much like how Sasuke tolerated the Kyuubi, only he knew even less about Gaara than he did the fox bastard.

“Wait here,” The shinobi stops him in front of low wooden double doors. They’re flanked by shinobi in cloth masks that cover most of their heads, leaving only a horizontal slit for the eyes. The two guards eye him, but don’t make any move as his guide slips between the doors. He can feel Kurome dig his tiny pinprick claws into his side as he shuffles around, using his katana as a balance. Hokori was getting restless as well. He swore the little fox had his teeth sunk into his sealing scroll again.

When did I become so sentimental…

The doors part without a noise. Sasuke steps in without being told. They shut behind him again, and he scans the small windows, aware of no visible exits. There’s most likely a secret tunnel behind the Kazekage’s desk. Four anbu stand in a half circle around the long, low room. A huge table sits in the middle, with an array of stone chairs. There’s no cactus in the windows like how Sasuke remembers. Little bits of Gaara’s touch, he assumes. This

Kazekage, Gaara's *father,* sits with his hands steepled in front of him with a look of grave arrogance that immediately puts Sasuke in his bad graces.

"My anbu tell me you came with a procession of red foxes. Are you from Konoha?" The Kazekage leans back slightly when Sasuke steps forward.

Sasuke snorts. "We're not here to talk about where I come from."

The kazekage grows silent and still, and looks at him up and down, then glowers, annoyed. "It's clear as all day that you're Uchiha." The silence is deafening. Sasuke doesn't deny it. It would be stupid to deny it. He's never denied it before, and he won't start now.

Sasuke doesn't let the Kazekage have an inch of leverage. He can't. He *won't.* He takes a second to feel out those words, those hidden intentions. "Uchiha or not, Konoha has never been my home. But again, that's not what we're here to talk about."

The Kazekage takes a moment. He relents silently, a quick wave of his hand as if airing out his questions. "Sasori. You killed him."

Sasuke produces the two body scrolls. He ends up pulling Hokori along with them, and has to scruff the little terror by the neck and physically separate his teeth from the scroll. He does it with a flat face. Half the anbu go for their weapons, the other half shake with subtly contained laughter.

"I was told your foxes are waiting outside, terrorizing my chunin." the Kazekage growls. "I was never told you had fennec foxes in your pack as well."

Is that what they're called? Sasuke puts Hokori on his shoulder and shows him the scrolls. "They go where I go. It's a miracle the reds stayed behind." Sasuke places the scrolls on the table in front of him. When one of the anbu goes to take them, he stops them with a subtle glare. "This isn't a token of goodwill. This is a trade." He spits at the faceless man, "I'm no village shinobi. I'm a bounty hunter."

The Kazekage regards him through narrow eyes. He taps a finger on the table rhythmically. Sasuke waits, patiently, as still as he can muster, for an answer. A price tag on the corpses under Sasuke's hands. He's never done this before. But it's no different, in a way, than getting paid for a mission. It's *his* mission. A personal one. It's vengeance, and savior, and avenger. It's Naruto whispering in his ears that *he'll meet him on the other side.* The other side of what? Of this? Of this world where Sasuke's been reduced into killing for money rather than merit. He shouldn't be here.

"Father!" The doors burst open. Sasuke's first instincts are to go for his katana, but he hesitates. He's in no position to make any moves. So he stills, and waits. He's got his back to the doors, but that voice was vaguely familiar. It pulls at the corners of his mind, digging up decade old memories. He senses her chakra, all wind and sand. She's young too, no more than eight. And the Kazekage, despite his gruffness and cruelty, would try to behead him if he so much glared in Temari's direction.

Temari gets the memo pretty quick that she'd stumbled into something, but she doesn't back down, only grows quiet. She steps cautiously around Sasuke. Their eyes meet for a second. It's another ghost, Sasuke thinks. She's the first person he's recognized since he's gotten here. He nearly jolts away, surprised when she looks almost as she did during the chunin exams. Except she's tiny. Sasuke distinctly remembers her being the tallest of the three sand siblings, and much taller than twelve year old Sasuke. Her focus is pulled quickly to Hokori, but then she's past him, carefully putting herself next to her father. "What are you doing here?" He hisses at her under his breath.

"It's...Gaara." She says back, so quiet that Sasuke shouldn't have heard it. Sasuke reaches out his senses, and...yeah. There's Gaara. He's closer than he was before. And Angry. There's bloodlust coming from him in waves. Sasuke pulls back into himself and bites the inside of his cheek, annoyed that he can't do anything. "He's been…acting weird...more than usual." Sasuke feels very out of place at that moment.

"Go find Baki, he can handle this," The Kazekage shoos her away. An anbu guard swiftly escorts her out. Temari looks perturbed when she leaves, and casts one look over her shoulder, glaring at Sasuke like he was at fault for all her troubles. But more than anything, she's a terrified child with a monster for a brother.

Sasuke doesn't comment on the intrusion, and neither does the Kazekage. It's as if it never happened. Sasuke gets his money, the amount listed in the bingo book along with a third extra for the amount of puppets he brought back, and Sasuke unfurls the scrolls and releases the seals. Hokori jumps with a quick hiss in his ears, and nearly tumbles off his shoulder when dozens of broken puppets pop into existence. There's a pause in the room as they continue to pile up. The only indication of surprise is the slight widening of the Kazekage's eyes as he stares at the face of Sasori, dead, in the middle of all the carnage.

"What's your name, bounty hunter?" The Kazekage mutters.

Sasuke only shakes his head. "Names are not necessary."

"You don't want credit for this?"

"You've seen my face, and my foxes. If there's anyone with these things that are alike in every way, then maybe I'll consider a name." He thinks of his younger self, pattering after Itachi back in Konoha, and smiles secretly.

"How about Kitsune?"

Sasuke feels a lump form in his throat. "Absolutely not."

The Kazekage raises a questioning brow. "You run with foxes, but refuse to be one?"

"I'm sure the Kyuubi would bite my head off."

"You speak as if you know the bijuu." The Kazekage mutters darkly.

Sasuke shrugs. He really dug his grave with this one, so he guesses he'll have to lie in it. Then again, with his pack of foxes, the connections would be inevitable. The connections were inevitable *despite* the foxes. Sasuke had a link to the Kyuubi's human form, even now. And he can feel the seal itch under his skin. He resists reaching up to press on his shoulder, where it burns the brightest. "I know enough to tread lightly around bijuu, especially the fox kind."

"Fine then, you'll be a nameless Uchiha bounty hunter with his skulk of foxes, I'm sure that will raise less questions." The Kazekage directs one of his anbu to hand over a thick envelope filled with his ryo. "I'm sure Konoha will track you to the ends of the Earth. Both Uchiha and Kitsune...And not theirs. That makes you more than a threat. It makes you a prize."

Sasuke inclines his head in a faux bow. Hokori yips in his ear, like a goodbye. "I'm aware of that." Sasuke lost his subtly the day his Sun died. The day he got shot to the other side of time. The day the Kyuubi vanished. He'll have to be those things now, both Uchiha and fox and sun. He'll have to be both hero and villain. He'll have to bring the world down on him, and hunt both shadow and light to keep this world from collapsing on itself. And he'll have to do it alone.

It hurt all over again. The loneliness that he filled with fox companions, ghosts of things he's lost and new things he's finding along the way. Sasuke grieves in the worst ways. Bloody ways. Ways that dictate he's being too hasty, and not fast enough. He takes his time walking through forests, and dispatches enemies with clean efficiency. He wanders without direction, until he finds a weed and pulls it root and stem. Then and only then does he gain his traction again.

Sasori is dead. The cycle will continue until he wanders across his next prey. Until then, he's free to meander. He's free to be self destructive and seek out ghosts until he bleeds.

* * *

Sasuke stays in Suna when the sun arcs high above, then comes crashing down between huge sandstone cliffs, and vanishes under the desert horizon. The nights in Suna are filled with wisps of dust in the air, and the sky has enough stars to see all the way to the next universes. The inn he stays in let his foxes up the stairs, and they swirl around him in clouds of orange and black. Gin and Yuki pace the edge of the roof with flicking black tipped tails and bright reflecting eyes. Aka is sitting with her back straight, observing the mounds of houses below them, and the edge of the cliffs, where anything or anyone could leap over at any second.

Sasuke thinks she knows something he doesn't. So while Aka watches the cliffs, he watches her. There's a twitch of her fur along her spine, like bugs were crawling on her skin. Sasuke sees her amber eyes glitter with knowing mischief. He wonders what she's looking at. He always wonders what his foxes look at. Do they see ghosts too? Ghosts that follow him around, or are they peering into the fabric of reality? They must see what he really is, how out of place he is.

He’s from the other side of time. A different reality. Somewhere they can’t reach, but somehow they can reach him.

Or is it purple flames and white tipped tails she sees? Because that’s what Sasuke sees. There’s a shadow of an animal creeping up and around huge dark cliffs, easily avoiding prying eyes. Sasuke stands quickly when he spots Karasu making his way over Suna’s defenses. He’s leaping forward as he spots the flicker of angry-bright chakra and the form of a man following *his* fox.

With his heart in his throat, he makes his way closer. Aka somehow follows him with sparks in her fur, and he scoffs. “Are you keeping secrets from me too?” He asks her, and gets a wicked grin in return. He doesn’t get much more than that, as a wall of malicious red chakra halts him in his tracks. Karasu sees him, or smells him, or hears him, and the black fox lets out a warning growl. He lands stiffly, his shoulder blade twinging and smarting painfully as the Kyuubi pulls chakra through his seals.

He’s shaking, Sasuke realizes when he goes for his katana. He doesn’t draw the blade, but keeps his trembling fingers curled tight around the handle. Hokori, ever present around his shoulders, leaps down with a happy wave of his tail. He watches with sharingan eyes as the little fox bounds between a thin alley covered in shadows. Karasu is there with his twin tails swishing. He’s standing guard, staring up at Sasuke with a challenge.

Sasuke hisses at him, watches as those triangle ears flatten and Karasu crouches down, edging closer to the side of the building. “That’s what I thought, little traitor.”

And he feels that chakra pulse once, before he spots red among the black, and he can’t keep his cool any longer. Sasuke’s vision zeroes in on glowing eyes and crimson hair, and he rushes forward. He’s quick enough that the Kyuubi can only just dodge a lethal swing of his katana. It nicks the corner of his ear, but it heals just as fast. Claws go for his blade, they scrape like metal against metal. The Kyuubi grunts when Sasuke presses forward into his defenses. His eyes glow, slitted and dangerous. His aura of hatred burns right into Sasuke’s own, and they’re locked, suddenly, into a shoving match, claws and sword caught together. They circle, neither gaining or losing ground, until they’re in opposite spots to where they started. The Kyuubi steps into a thin stream of pale moonlight, and Sasuke falters.

Sasuke hadn’t registered the second chakra signature, not with it subdued to nothing, and the Kyuubi’s own hatred clouding everything for miles. He should have seen it. Seen the second head of blood red hair, the tiny pale hands clinging to the Kyuubi’s neck like a lifeline.

There, half asleep with hazy blue-green eyes, is Gaara.

The Kyuubi takes note of his hesitation and quickly shoves him away. They stand, ready to attack each other at a moment's notice. Sasuke eyes Aka from the corner of the little alley they’ve found themselves in. The tiny version of Gaara is waking up too. His eyes grow wider and wider still. When he spots Sasuke, he grips the Kyuubi’s hair in his little fists. “Who is that?” He whispers, quiet as the wind. And it's soft, not the harsh bloodlust Sasuke had sensed earlier that day. Nothing but a shy imitation of the quiet madness Sasuke had known all those years ago in the chunin exams.

Sasuke straightens out of his stance immediately. “What are you doing?” He hisses with venom.

The Kyuubi sneers. He uses one hand to hike Gaara higher on his back. The kid’s legs are wrapped around his middle like a backpack. The Kyuubi backs away, eyeing him and the two foxes who have made it to his side. He looks at Aka with curiosity. “You’ve collected yourself a little skulk, have you? You know, foxes usually travel alone.”

“What are you doing with Gaara?” Sasuke asks again. He lowers his katana until the tip of the blade is leveled right for the Kyuubi’s heart.

The Kyuubi still has his crimson eyes on Aka. They glance only briefly at Hokori. “You’ve done a difficult thing, inspiring loyalty in a group of wild foxes. Naruto would be proud, wouldn’t he.”

“Don’t-” Sasuke starts. He chokes. “Don’t say that name.” It comes out no more than a whisper. A heavy silence follows.

The Kyuubi shifts his weight to one foot. He’s prepared to leave on a moment's notice. Sasuke won’t let him, not until he explains. It dawns on him, when he spots Karasu, with his two tails swishing like they’re weightless, padding silently behind the Kyuubi, as quiet as a shadow. “You’ve been spying on me. This whole time.” He says, half astounded, half furious. “You’ve been tracking me from the very start!”

The Kyuubi grins, wicked fierce and nothing like how Naruto should grin. It's a fox’s grin, the one Aka gives him when she refuses to do his bidding. The one Gin throws over her shoulder when she catches a particularly difficult prey. The one Mimi shoots him when he tears chunks of black threads from the hem of his cloak.

Sasuke scoffs, incredulous. “Why in the *hell* did you run from me?”

The Kyuubi narrows his eyes, pupils thinner than a hair. “You, of all people, should know why.” *Ghosts.* They’re ghosts to each other. Mirrors of themselves, reflecting all the bad and crazy. Naruto was the one that bound them together. Sasuke absently reaches for the seal on his shoulder, the moon on his palm, the etchings of patterns on his left forearm, the fox dancing on his katana, Aka and Hokori. Ghosts.

And Sasuke’s blind sided by the fact that he hasn’t been alone at all. The Kyuubi’s been keeping tabs on him, watching him, waiting. He’s still angry. “You’re a coward,” he spits.

The Kyuubi growls. His claws glint like steel. His hair, growing longer than Sasuke’s even seen it, is a wild mane that drapes almost past his shoulders. It spikes and bristles like fox fur. Gaara, who’s been quiet, hugs the Kyuubi tight, and buries his face into the back of the Kyuubi’s neck. “You don’t need my help. My family *does.”*

Sasuke’s attention falls to Gaara. “You’re going to start a war.”

“The Akatsuki are after them, you imbecile. And we both know the villages can’t protect their bijuu from them!”

“And what? *You* can?” It’s a stinging blow, one that Sasuke catches on the Kyuubi’s face. He’s not good at hiding his emotions. Then again, Sasuke doubts he’s even had to until now. Sasuke takes the knife and digs. “You and a whole army weren’t strong enough then, what makes this any different?”

“Because, you fucking walnut, I’m prepared this time. And...and I’m taking them away, where not even Madara can get to us-”

Sasuke reels back. “You’re not...how did you-”

The Kyuubi snorts. He picks at something under his claws, and gestures to his own body. *Naruto’s* body. “I’m chakra. Not blood and bone. This is Naruto’s body still, not mine. It’s his blood that runs through these veins. He’s Uzumaki, so now I am as well. Uzushio doesn’t discriminate. All it needs is the blood of a descendant, and the island opens for me as much as it opened for him.”

The Kyuubi watches him carefully. Sasuke doesn’t know what to make of it. He wasn’t going to fight the Kyuubi, not in Suna with Gaara clinging to his back like a lifeline. And Gaara… Gaara was reserved, and calm. No bloodlust, not a whiff of Bijuu chakra that normally rolled off him in bloody waves. Sasuke could sense wind and sand, and none of the crazy lurking behind shadowy eyes.

“You fixed his seal.”

“Yes. I fixed his fucking seal. Do you think I could carry him like this if I didn’t?” Before Sasuke can answer, the Kyuubi plows on. “We’ve been kept in cages all our lives, and look where it got us. I’m taking them, and I’m leaving. The villages treat their jinchuuriki like they’re the scum of the earth, and it’s because of that scorn that most of them never discover how to fight properly. They’re kept around to be tools, used then discarded at the first sign of trouble. Gaara’s been through hell already, and look at him! He’s seven!”

“It’s okay…” Gaara mutters. “I’m okay now.”

“Yes, you are kit!” the Kyuubi shouts vehemently. “And you’ll continue to be okay as long as I’m breathing.”

“Does he want to leave?”

The Kyuubi rolls his eyes. “Don’t give me that shit, Uchiha. Not *you* of all people. You don’t have the *right* to talk about leaving villages behind.”

“I was *wrong,”* Sasuke hisses. It sounds more desperate than angry. “Don’t make the same mistake.” *Because your eyes look more like mine than Naruto’s, and you’re acting like me more than Naruto. And Naruto wanted you to be better, to not be angry, just like me. And you’re going to fall in that hatred until you’re nothing. Just like me.*

The Kyuubi snorts, as if it’s all the conviction he needs. “You were wrong because when you left, you did it for all the *wrong reasons.* You left for revenge, and for *power.* I’m giving them the choice to leave, to live a better life, a life *without* hatred.”

Sasuke sucks in a sharp breath. Maybe he's wrong again. Maybe he's right. There's a tidal wave between his lungs, and lightning. under his skin. And he speaks before he can reign in his thoughts. "Hatred is the very nature of your chakra, Kyuubi, don't try to fool me."

The Kyuubi wrinkles his nose. It's Naruto's nose. His face is still remarkably Naruto. It's like thorns in his heart, encroaching closer and closer the longer he looks. "My *name,* Uchiha, is Kurama. And I know you know it." *I do know it.* Sasuke doesn't respond to that. His thoughts are a jumble of mess and hurt. He doesn't know what he'll do if Kurama slips through his fingers again. He's not Naruto, and he wouldn't trust himself to know the right words to keep Kurama in his sight.

"It's Kurama Uzumaki. And I'm going to save my family, and their Jinchuuriki," he says, it sounds achingly familiar in a way it shouldn't. "are you with me, or will I have to kill my last thread to a different time?"

Sasuke feels the seal burn, sees it burn Kurama in the twitch of his eyes and the flick of irritation across the line of his shoulders. He sees Gaara eye the ink that swirls just under the child's fingers. These are the lines that etch their vessels together. Sasuke can't tear a seal from his skin, Kurama can't burn it from his. It'll remain, stubborn and persistent, even in death they'll be marked together. But it's more than that too. It's more than being linked through a stupid seal, one that they've been ignoring for all these weeks anyway. If Sasuke and Naruto were different sides of the same coin, then he and Kurama were the same side of different coins.

He relents. Because who is he to stop Kurama from this? *This feels like a mistake. Like a repeat but with different players. But what the hell. Subtly went out the window a long time ago.* "I'll hunt the Akatsuki. You gather the Bijuu. And if you need help-"

"I know how to use your bloody seal, Uchiha."

"I've never been good at seals," Sasuke admits, "that's...his work."

Kurama adjusts Gaara again. And Gaara, who stares with his eyes as wide as moons, with his fists clenched full of Kurama's red hair, looks to Sasuke like he's something grave, like he can see heartache written all over his face. Sasuke scowls at him. Gaara stares, relentlessly.

"You know my name now. Use it. And what should I call this Uchiha, who's not Sasuke anymore?"

Sasuke shrugs. "I don't have a name."

"So I gain one, and you lose yours?" Kurama scoffs, "Pathetic." He grins slyly. "Names have power, even bijuu know that. Bijuu might know it more than most. To be nameless is a horrible thing. You become the titles that the stories give you, and most of them will not be so kind. Even shadows need names, Uchiha brat."

"So?" Sasuke glares at him evenly. "I'm solo in this journey, apparently," it comes out more bitter than he intended. "My foxes don't need to know my name, as long as I know their's. And you call me any variety of *bastard* or *idiot* you can think of."

“Then pick a name that means more than a title. Pick a name that’s cruel to our enemies, that makes them pause, that makes them think.” Kurama points to himself, “Uzumaki is a powerful name in Konoha. Most older shinobi will hesitate, when they hear who I am, and their hesitation is my power.”

“You think too much about those kinds of things.”

Kurama gestures to, well, all of him. “I’m not the one dripping in sentimentality, Uchiha brat. Look at you, *Look at your katana,* that cloak that’s from a country that’s never been yours, you even kept that stupid braid Naruto did in your hair ages ago-” Sasuke reaches for the tiny thing tucked behind his ear, “-so don’t talk to *me* about thinking too much. If you were so keen on becoming nothing but nameless, why are you covered in memories?” Kurama takes a tiny step forward. A peace offering between them in the form of his words that come out like scrapes of a cat’s tongue. Sasuke feels he’s being berated by a parent, or a teacher trying to get him to come to the right conclusion.

“Your last name already has a lot of power. What could give you more? What could take Madara and *crush* him?”

Sasuke huffs. He lets his memories come cascading down on top of him, looking for names and faces and people and ghosts. Things that he could call himself, things he’s already called himself. Once, he was Taka. Once he was Hebi. Once he was *Avenger.* Once he was a brother...a second born son. He remembers adults cooing over him at a young age, the cold eyes of a father, the warm gaze of a mother. He thinks to people he’s seen, and names he’s heard thrown into the wind like leaves. He hears powerful names, and meek names of powerful shinobi. Names of fictional characters, and names of people who meant nothing, but they were names nonetheless. He thinks of his name, of Uchiha, of their nature. He knows Uchiha are nothing but sentimental bastards, who love more fiercely than anyone could ever know. And he lands in a name that means so little to him, a comment thrown his way, what uncles and aunts and distant cousins would crow at him in passing. He latches onto it, onto who it had been, on who it represented.

“Izuna.” He whispers. Another second born son. Another shadow in his brother’s power. Another lost soul in the war of life. A hesitation. A cruel jab at the man named Madara. If evil was a sound, it would come in the form of Kurama’s laughter. “I’ll be Izuna Uchiha.”

Chapter End Notes

For Sasuke's new name: Izuna was Madara's younger brother who was killed by Tobirama. I picked that name because Sasuke apparently looks like him. I actually had that name planned out before I thought about how it could effect the plot lol. From here on out, Sasuke will be referred to as Izuna.

Flesh and Bone and Blood

Chapter Summary

Kurama's been running around doing...something.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kurama screams, and it's not enough. He begs, and it’s not enough. He rips at human flesh and digs his claws down to human bones. He feels pain deep inside his chest, a chasm that was filled once with something indescribable. Nothing was left but a pit. A hole where a human heart should be. Kurama’s never been human though, nothing but a wraith of malicious chakra, now given a form of real consequence. There’s the residue of Naruto’s soul buried somewhere. Hints of fleetingly warm sun-like chakra dance just out of his reach, fraying on the edges of his senses.

He’s burning the rest of his jinchuuriki out, and it hurts so much all Kurama can do is curl up on the dewy grass and cry until his human lungs start to give. Until he’s coughing blood and spitting bile. *Poison, I’m poison to this body.* And it’s too late. He should know. Naruto used most of his chakra healing that Uchiha brat, then opening the portal to get here. Half of Kurama’s chakra went with it too, but he didn’t let Kurama touch Sasuke. That was all him.

An idiot! Kurama thinks wretchedly. A stinging warm water flows down his face. He wipes at it, disgusted at himself. He can’t stop though. *This pathetic human body… this body that was his…* Kurama wraps his cold talons over his shoulders and presses in on himself, like he could shred this form and grow into nothing but a construct of energy. But all he gets are bruises, and all he feels is the ache in his new limbs, and the hunger gnawing like a beast in his hollow stomach.

For three days he’s been burning. Ever since he let loose and nearly crushed Sasuke under his talons, because it was *his* fault. Clearly it was Sasuke’s fault that he was there and not Naruto. But then the Uchiha had been right as well, that he was the one in Naruto’s body, the one who scooped up whatever was left and seared away the last drops of Naruto’s soul. He panicked, and then he ran. As far as Naruto’s legs could carry him, and then he’d collapsed in a patch of mossy wild grass, and let agony settle deep inside him.

Kurama scares away natural things on his own. His screaming had brought the rest of the forest to heel. Not a sound, but his wretched cries. Nothing but his trembling sobs. No distraction from his own misery, his own pain, his own fire that made embers out of him. When Kurama stops screaming, when his tears run as dry as a desert and he can’t feel the tips on his fingers or his very human feet, he sits up in total numbness.

There's a bubble around him where he can't sense. Where there's no sound, no taste, no rustle of wind. It takes him a long moment of utter confusion to realize he's formed a barrier of pure chakra around him. He's the eye in his own fiery storm, and he's drawing too much attention to his misery. Kurama stills the raging around him and buries it, or he tries to. It eats at him under his skin. Suddenly, he needs to move, so he does. He lets animal instincts take over, feels the prickling unease crawling all over his skin.

I need to go. Now. So he does. Kurama runs without a direction. He goes the way his gut tells him. His gut was normally right. He was normally correct in those kinds of things. And he knows, somewhere in the recesses of his soul, that any living thing that comes into his path right now will be scorched into nothing but ash. Kurama would kill Konoha-nin without a thought right now. It was a miracle Sasuke had lived. If he hadn't said those terrible words that ring through Kurama's head day and night, he knows deep down that no jutsu in the world could stop his fury.

Kurama doesn't stop for days, not until he takes one leap too far and slips off the branches in an ungraceful pile of limbs. Kurama curses so loud that a flock of starlings flutter out of their trees. A crow caws mockingly. Kurama sits up from where he'd fallen and takes a deep, stabilizing breath.

Then another.

And Another.

"Calm the *fuck* down." He grips a handful of his hair and pulls. When a couple of red strands come loose, he stares at them, dumbfounded. "Red?" He says outloud. He pulls a strand of fluffy hair down between his eyes. *It's red?!* Kurama jumps to his feet. He spins in a circle, then sniffs the air, looking for water. There's a small puddle just over a couple mossy rocks to his left. He ditches the path he'd been on to tumble into the thick undergrowth of the forest. Kurama crouches frantically in front of the puddle, and he looks.

The face that stares back at him shoots pinpricks of ice and fire through his veins. He's locked into slitted red eyes, *his eyes.* Kurama knows those eyes at least. They've been his since the very beginning. But the rest of him… he thinks for a moment he's back in Kushina's body, with a wealth of crimson hair atop his head, short and fluffed just how Naruto had had it. His whiskers were gone. Kurama traces where he'd gotten a scar on his cheek, but it wasn't there anymore. His face was unmarred, not even the tiny stretches in his skin from growing too quickly, or the many scars from battles and practices. Kurama pulls at the skin around his eyes. There were patches of bright red. *Burned.* He thinks, but it's not scar tissue. Just...red. Kurama dips his hands into the puddle to distort his features, then splashes his face a couple of times to get rid of the cloudy hatred building up.

"No time for that-" Kurama says aloud. He spins on his heels and he goes.

It takes a while for him to understand *where* his instincts are taking him. A day and night pass before he figures it out. And they're not his instincts, they're *Narutos.*

East. He's going East.

Kurama breaks the tree line and tumbles onto a wide expanse of sandy cliffs. Just under him, and spread far out into the sunrise, is the ocean. Waves pound against the shore, a drum in his ear, the rhythmic pound of his heart. It's blue, like eyes that burned to red. The sun's as bright as yellow hair, and Kurama stops and wonders if he's ever stopped to wonder before.

There's memories here somewhere, maybe they're not even his. They're buried under years of cobwebs. Even as he chases them, like he chases the waves down to the beach, they shy away. They tumble into the undertow of the ocean and disappear. Kurama stands with his toes buried in wet sand. He lets the water and seafoam run up his legs until he's soaked to the knees. There's a breeze that smells like salt. It sprays mist into his hair. It's not like Kiri though, nothing about this mist is dark or drenched in chakra and blood. It simply *is.*

He sits in the water for a while after that, until the sun has risen far past noon, and then falls to the other side of the sky. Kurama thinks that if he were himself, he could fall into the lovely waters and let the sand bury him. But he's not just himself anymore. He's bigger than all that. He's not a lone creature of hate and malice. He's a monster with a family, with a life, with goals and the dreams of best friends hanging off his shoulders.

What would Naruto do? Naruto would protect what's precious to him. He'd protect his friends, and protect the world. Well, Kurama could give a rats ass about the rest of the world right now. But his family…? His Bijuu siblings and this new, younger Naruto? *And what about revenge?* Kurama growls to himself. *What about the Akatsuki, and the ones who killed your old world?*

It's only then that it dawns on him, as the world falls into dusk, that he doesn't care. He *can't* care. He can only think of Naruto, only of his siblings who need him, and even of the villages themselves, and what they *do* to Jinchuuriki and Bijuu. *It's all messed up. This world is rotten inside and out, and I've had enough of it!*

Something in him tugs him forward, into the waves. He uses chakra to pull himself up, so he stands on top. Something about it is so natural that he doesn't even think as he runs forward. The moon is largest here, where it kisses the horizon and bleeds silver into the waves. He leaps and bounds, watching as the ocean rises and falls under his feet. He's controlling it. *Or is it controlling me?* It doesn't matter.

Maybe it's both. Maybe it's neither.

The night that follows is dark and starless. Kurama thinks of a storm, and he's greeted by a flash of brilliant white lightning that makes his red mane frizz like an angry cat. The rain that comes pelts at his skin and soaks him down to bone. But it's not chilling like it is in Konoha. This rain tastes like freedom, and starlight. Kurama lifts his head, and even as he bounds over crashing waves and tides that rise higher than Konoha's mountains, he fears nothing. What does he have to fear? He is a storm in his own right. He's Fire. He's Chakra. He's the Universe. Death has never meant anything to a Bijuu, only a temporary lapse in consciousness. As simple as falling into a dreamless sleep.

He watches the clouds rumble and roll together, feels the thunder crackling in his core, lightning under his skin. And Kurama feels alive.

It takes two and a half days to run clean across the relentless storm. He follows the path the ocean gives him, cradling him in valleys of crested waves and the swirl of turbulent currents. When he reaches the shore, it's both a shock of lightning through his spine, and a hug of warm sunshine on his skin. His blood and bones hum as Kurama gets closer. They thrum with unknown potential.

Only… Kurama knows. Kurama's been here before, seen it through a set of different eyes. Muscle memory, he thinks, and he looks at hands that will never be his, and feet that have walked their own path for as long as they have, and as long as they can. Kurama… has no place to go. And if this was Naruto's home—once, for four months where he burned skeletons, and donned spiral clothes, and watched the storm that rages forever, regardless of time or space—then this home could be his.

Kurama could make it his wayward stop for lost souls. Or something terribly, humanly, sentimental.

So he does. Kurama starts easily, the same way this body remembers doing it before. He raises stone pillars and clears the protective seals of debris. He brushes moss and lichen off basalt columns that reach high into the sky. Kurama uncovers the secrets Naruto had done those months ago. Some of them he doesn't remember at all, and he spends a few days simply wandering. There's no Sasuke to help in the search this time, so he has to rediscover all ten points in the seal and activate them separately, sacrificing a bit of blood and chakra at each.

The seal was intuitive, like the island itself was alive and calling for Uzumaki blood. Kurama's chakra isn't Uzumaki though. It's not the same wind and water. His is fire, and when he lights the seals they glow a bloody red instead of a calming blue. Kurama doesn't understand seals, besides his very own prisons. Those he's known intimately. He'd stare at the lines on the bars of his cages, and the spinning letters on the floor of his prison. He'd study the patterns and plotted many times on how to break them.

So Kurama doesn't know seals that mean "protect" but he knows the ones that mean "contain" and the ones that "bind" and "transform." He's seen this barrier before, and understood it intrinsically, that Uzushio itself was one large, nye impenetrable container. It kept things out, but also held its precious Uzumaki close. And the tug in his gut that had led him here, the same that Naruto felt those few months ago—had always felt—was proof of the island's conviction. Kurama had sensed that longing in all his jinchuuriki. The inherent *wrong* of Konoha. Mostly though, it could be easily buried. His jinchuuriki had been good at that as well.

When Kurama makes it into the village proper, where the stone buildings are nothing but razed rubble, he sits where ten points converge, and he chuckles quietly. "How did you fall the first time?" Naruto had theories. Sasuke had more. Sasuke believes that they were betrayed from the inside. Naruto didn't want to hear it, so they left it at that.

Kurama presses his bloodied palms flat to the ground, and it hums for him, a subtle rumble that feels more like snoring than it does an influx of powerful, ancient chakra. The island awakens. "You slept long enough, Uzushio." Kurama mutters. The wind sighs and brushes

against his face and hair. He smells the sea, and hears the bird song turn into a sweet melody. Kurama grins to himself, heartache clinging to his lungs like cobwebs.

But of course, this one seal is not enough. He knows that most are buried under the rubble Kiri left. Some were gone forever. The ones that relied on specifically shaped roofs, or even the fountains in the town squares, were parts of bigger designs. The whole city itself was a seal, one that Kurama couldn't hope to replicate. But he could make some of his own, and revive what he could.

Kurama stands, letting the lines in the stones fade from red to black, then to nothing at all. He walks down paths that he remembers from eyes that weren't his. And he notices, belatedly, that there's something *off* about the whole experience. Something's missing. Something that burns at his shoulder. Kurama looks at his right palm and traces the sun tattoo. *Right.* The thing missing wasn't a something, but a someone. Kurama growls at himself and shakes his head violently. *Those were Naruto's stupid memories! I'll be damned if I become* fond *of that Uchiha bastard!*

It's only when he calms down that he spots the first signs of wildlife creeping out along the broken tile road. Kurama feels its chakra before he can even identify the creature. A pure black fox, pattering easily between the ruined buildings. What caught Kurama off guard were the two tails swaying behind it as if they were weightless, and the spark of purple in its dark fur.

"Hey, you," Kurama calls, and the fox perks up to stare at him. It's an immediate change from wary to recognition. The fox bounds over with a skip, its tails wagging eagerly. When it reaches him, it dips its nose to the ground slightly, before barking happily.

"Can't speak yet, can you?" Kurama reaches out and ruffles up its dark fur. The fox closes its eyes, content. "Can you fly yet, or have you been trapped here for a while?" Kurama doesn't need a verbal response, he simply knows. The black fox can fly. Fast, but he can't change his shape yet. He'll be stuck as a little fox for a while longer. "You know who I am?"

Yes.

"Good. there's something I need you to do, if you're up for a little adventure?"

* * *

He sits under a waterfall. It's one he knows from memories that aren't exactly his. But when he thinks of a place to go for peace and tranquility, his body moves of its own. Naruto's muscles and Naruto's blood already know this place. When he sits on the slick wet stones just under the falls, and brings knuckles together, he easily falls into the nonexistent reality of his very own mindscape. It's not hard to pull and twist this place around, and he reaches instinctively outward, seeking the sleeping minds of his brethren.

Kurama imagines the space taking a form. It starts with the waterfall, the pounding force driving deep into his back muscles, keeping him grounded, tied to the earth so he can't accidentally slip from this vessel. *I'm not ready to leave him just yet.* He can feel the edge of dust and wind and burning insanity from Shukaku. He shies away from him for now, though he senses the tanuki's focus narrowing down on him. He searches for the others in the expanding mindscape. He goes from desert hills to stony cliffs, sees flashes of blue flames, and swirling patterns of black, fiery fur.

"Kurama…" drawls a curious voice, and Matatabi bounds forward from the depths of black nothingness. The cat tilts their head curiously, then leans down in their massive form to sniff desievely at Kurama's very human, very small form."It's been a long time since you've reached for one of us...I thought we'd all forgotten."

"Maybe we did," Kurama says, shrugging. He smiles despite himself, relief flooding through him at the very sight of his sibling alive and relatively safe. "But that's about to change."

"You're the eldest," Matatabi chuckles lightly, "it would be you who has to wrangle in the rest of us."

"For a long time, it was me that tore us apart."

Matatabi growls. "You had your right, we all did. These humans… they're nothing to us, and yet they...they trap us," they sound wistful. "I long to run again, faster than my human can." Matatabi's ear flick as they regard him. "You have a human form now, is this your jinchuuriki?"

Kurama's breath catches in his throat. "I...I'm not exactly sure what happened, but yes, this is his vessel. But he's...not here anymore."

Matatabi grows still at that. Their ears flatten against their head. "Did you...like this jinchuuriki? Because I know you, and you've always had hatred somewhere. But...you sound young again, Kurama." They say it with a hint of hope, like it couldn't possibly be true.

"I did," Kurama mutters, "he was my best friend, and I all but killed him."

Matatabi swirls their tails, muzzle curling softly. "Then I am sorry. Sorry that it happened, sorry that you're being carried in a horrible reminder. I'm not fond of being in a cage, but my Jinchuuriki...I do not wish for her to suffer, nor die."

"Oh?" Kurama latches onto anything to change the subject before he breaks down into madness. "What's she like?" Matatabi's latest jinchuuriki was dead before Naruto could ever meet her. A sad fate. One that Kurama vows to change, even if it's only for minutes, only for seconds, he'll do something this time. *Because I can. Because I know better now, Because Naruto-*

"She's quick willed, and has enough fire for the both of us," Matatabi chuckles, "she's a free spirit, so we got along. She likes to run; ran away from Kusa, ran from the shinobi who wished her life and loyalty, ran from all needless things."

“Where is she-where are *you* right now?” Kurama asks.

Matatabi flicks a spectral ear. Their dual colored eyes shine. “In the mountains of Lightning country. We’re closer to Frost than Kusa though. Soon, we will move again-”

“Go East!” Kurama blurts. “That’s where I am, in Uzushio. You’re not going to be safe traveling alone, trust me on this, Matatabi.”

Matatabi eyes him suspiciously. “For many centuries, you were touted as a beacon of hatred. For many decades you never called, never cared,” Kurama feels shame burn through him, as hot as hatred and twice as potent, “so why now, Kurama? Tell me why I should go east.”

“The Akatsuki will be hunting you soon, hunting all of us. They plan on reuniting our chakra into the ten tails, then giving our power to Madara Uchiha,” Kurama spits the name like venom, “they want to raze this world from the ground, and to do it they’ll imprison us and kill our jinchuuriki!”

Matatabi hisses. “How do you know this?”

Kurama swallows. This is something he can’t keep from his siblings. So he tells his story, from his first meetings with Naruto Uzumaki, to how he found himself changing his ways due to friendship. He details the war, and then explains the end of the world to Matatabi. Then Uzushio, and how the place was hidden and guarded, and how abandoned it was, how *safe* it could become.

“My jinchuuriki, in this time, he’s still alive, and I plan on saving him, but more than that, I want to make sure he’s not living a life of suffering. Jinchuuriki suffer, that's why your Yugito left, right?” Kurama finishes, “That’s why we’re all clouded by hatred, because it's all we know. I want to break that, I want to free us, once and for all.”

Matatabi nods, slow and deliberate. “I see.” Then, “how do I find Uzushio? I’ve never been.”

Kurama thinks long and hard.

Before he can come up with a good answer, he feels a tugging at the back of his mind. Matatabi also looks up, past Kurama, to something behind him. Kurama whirls around as a blast of rough sand smacks him in the face. Matatabi grimaces. “That’s another reason we don’t come here!” They snarl, “Shukaku is corrupting the whole place!”

Kurama gapes up at Shukaku, who glares down at him with bitter anger. “Look who finally decides to wreck the party!” Shukaku shrieks, or was that a laugh? “And in that pathetic little shell no less—what are you, a fucking human now?” The desert starts flowing over into Matatabi’s mindscape, and she quickly darts out of Shukaku’s influence.

They crouch behind a boulder and hiss, “Get out of here, Shukaku! I don’t want to be infected with your crazy!”

Shukaku’s eyes glow dangerously bright. “I never wanted to be insane! But you try being stuffed into a teapot! You try having to deal with a whiny brat that knows nothing but hatred

and fear and death! They fucked that seal, then they keep trying to kill him! He loves death, he loves it because he loves me! I made him that way and *humans* made me this way! Revenge is sweet, my siblings, the coldest nothing there ever is!" Shukaku brings down his tail and a wave of sand and dust knock Kurama into the air.

He lands with a splash, the roar of the waterfall too loud in his ears, the cold night's air biting into his goosebumped skin. Kurama spits out river water and sits up, the spray in his eyes. He's back in Uzushio, the dead of night creeping in on all sides. A few steadying breaths later, and he rises slowly from the water. Kurama shivers as a breeze of stormy wind rolls through the trees. It's a long and cold walk back to the ruins.

Shukaku first then.

Chapter End Notes

To be honest, I don't really like this chapter that much, besides Matatabi, I always liked them. I also chose them/them pronouns for the bijuu besides Kurama bc the fan wiki just calls them 'it' so idk... they don't really have gender, I assume because they're ~technically~ just constructs of energy?

I wanted to add more to this chapter but then I got lazy so here it is! Maybe I'll go back and write more for Kurama's POV. Who knows

Motion Picture Interludes

Chapter Summary

Things are moving, small little pieces starting to fit together.
Converging, maybe?

Chapter Notes

So when I was writing the original chapter 7 (which is now chapter 8) I realized there was too much narrative space between it and chapter 6. There were a lot of little things happening in between and in a lot of places, so I decided to mash everything into one chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Frost Country is not kind, especially not in fall. The snow falls in flurries, thick and heavy. Just cold enough to not melt, but warm enough that it turns everything to sludge and ice. It piles knee deep on the ground. Sasuke says to refrain from using chakra to walk on top. Instead they strap large, flat pieces of wood to their feet and trudge forward at a snail's pace. The wind bites through the scarf wrapped around his face, and he squints against the cold storm. No matter how much he looks, he can't see five feet in front of him.

Hell, he doesn't know which way is east anymore. Sasuke does. Or, his one arctic hawk does. It swoops and dives in and out of the overcast clouds, avoiding the swirls of snow and ice. It lands on Sasuke's outstretched arm, stays long enough to give Sasuke coordinates and the time of day, then vanishes in a poof of white smoke and feathers. Sasuke veers slightly right.

"Did he see how long the storm lasts?" Naruto calls. Sasuke had taken the lead a couple hours back. Though Naruto always had good endurance, Sasuke's fire techniques kept him warmer much longer. Every so often, Naruto would see him puff out smoke and flames; the only source of color in this barren, gray and white landscape. Normally, Naruto would have Kurama using his seal like a furnace, but the old fox was trying to recover as much of his lost chakra as possible. He was off limits unless there was a fight. Though he could feel the fox pacing restlessly in his seal space, vague coils of irritation rolling off him.

"There's a break up ahead, a few more miles," Sasuke calls back over his shoulder. He stops and waits for Naruto to catch up to him. "Dobe."

"Teme," Naruto mutters, "Not everyone can breathe fire like a damn dragon!" He punches Sasuke on the shoulder. "And you told us we can't use that much chakra, so what's your

excuse? Huh?"

"I'm trying not to freeze to death?" Sasuke holds out a hand, and Naruto takes it instinctively. He finds his fingers are bright red and colder than ice, much colder than Naruto's. He looks up at him just as Sasuke scoffs a brilliant plume of orange and yellow flames. "Despite what you may think, I'm pretty cold blooded."

Naruto grins, pulling Sasuke closer. "That's 'cause you're a snake bastard, right?" He chuckles to himself.

"Hn." Is all Sasuke has to say on that matter, but he grips their hands tighter, like he won't let go no matter what. It's enough for Naruto. It's more than enough.

Naruto pulls ahead, tugging Sasuke by his hand. "C'mon," he says, "We're so close." He smiles, because for just a second, if he believes hard enough, he can pretend that they're just two travelers who got lost in the blizzard.

Sasuke stares at him with something in his eyes, something that makes them shine, and Naruto wishes his eyes would always shine like that. Not a sharingan in sight. Just Sasuke. With his dark, glittering eyes, obsidian and crystal-like. Naruto only catches it in times like this, when he's smiling and Sasuke's just barely smirking. When they're caught up in being alive, rather than thinking of the dead. When they're breathing in snowflakes and puffing out orange flames. When the sky twinkles and the wind howls and there's a bite of frost on their skin.

When they forget what lies beyond the hills, what remains on the other side.

* * *

Kurama escapes Suna almost *too* easily, he thinks. But he flees the way he came, through the upper part of River country, bordering Ame, then continues straight into Fire country. He doesn't have time to skirt around Konoha's territory if he wants to meet Matatabi's jinchuuriki in Frost, though that was perhaps the safest thing to do. He *could* go through the smaller countries to look for Chomei. He knew, vaguely, that Son Goku and Kukuo were still in Iwa. He didn't get the chance to talk with them, but he should have before making the journey to Suna.

Kurama curses his own lack of foresight. The fox Sasuke-or Izuna now—had called Karasu bounds right by his heels, his small dark form a blur of shadows on the green grass. Kurama got lucky, he thinks, that a sandstorm had cut a path between him and Suna, erasing any evidence that he was there at all. Gaara had also been a little saint. The kid never complained, even when Kurama could feel Shukaku pressing up against the brand new seals that would confine him until Kurama could talk him out of genociding the entire Suna population. Kurama wouldn't blame him, not after what they did to him.

Kurama's 'plans' were more a conglomeration of ideas and feelings, nothing concrete and nothing coherent. He was never a strategist, but this...this mad dash across the continent and back again without stopping to consider his options… that was a new low for him. It's too late now. He's too far east to back track to Taki. And Matatabi needed him. They were the one not currently in a village. They were the most vulnerable.

He gets an idea then. A stupid idea.

Kurama's not the only one on his side, after all. He looks at Karasu. The fox stares at him, seemingly reading his mind. He gets a flat expression, immediately followed by the sense of indignity. He comes to a slow halt, careful not to jostle Gaara, who sleeps like the dead.

"Come here, you great lump," Kurama calls to Karasu, who hisses at him. The fox leaps forward regardless, biting at his hands. Kurama shuffles through his meager supplies, but finally unearths a half-used scroll. It was supposed to hold kunai, but Kurama had no use for kunai. He rips off a great chunk of blank paper, then rummages his hands around the forest floor. He finds what he's looking for easily. Karasu looks at him like he's crazy.

"Kurama-san?" A groggy voice pipes up behind him. He feels a hand tighten in his hair. Kurama easily lets Gaara down from his back, and the kid stands wearily. "What are you doing?"

"Writing a letter," Kurama mutters. He sets the twig he found on fire, watches it smolder and blacken.

Gaara stares down at the blank page. "We don't have any ink."

Kurama reaches up and runs a careful hand through Gaara's hair. Particles of his sand float around, coiling around his finger curiously. Gaara doesn't even try to hurt him. The kid leans into his touch, and Kurama hates the villages all over again. "You don't need ink to write. It's best for seals because of its precision, but you can write with this also," he holds up the flaming stick to Gaara's face, watches the wonderment in his wide blue-green eyes. Kurama smiles quietly to himself. He wonders when he last felt that same wonderment.

"You can write with fire?"

"Charcoal," Kurama corrects, and he blows out the flame. He lets the twig cool until the embers are no more, then begins. Gaara doesn't ask who he's writing to, simply watches as he scrawls characters down the page. Kurama's handwriting is awful. Gaara tells him that much, and he scoffs at the kid and asks if he would rather write it.

"That bastard better not ignore me," Kurama hisses to himself. He folds the paper into a thin strip, then turns to Karasu. The fox is already reaching for it. "Give this to him. If you're caught by anyone else, burn it, and come back here. Otherwise, don't leave him until he gives you an answer."

Karasu disappears into the shadows.

* * *

Kakashi stands at attention, alone, in the middle of the Hokage's office. The man himself sits at his desk, stacks upon stacks of files piles on either side. To his left stands a master code-breaker with a scroll opened in front of them. Kakashi can see from the cover that it's from Suna. On the right is one of the elders, stroking his long, greying beard with a pensive look on his aged face. The Hokage had his fingers steepled. Something was troubling him, clearly. Something that Kakashi was about to find out.

Danzo's death had shaken things up quite a bit. Kakashi made it a point to keep his own head out of it. He was there to follow the Hokage's orders. No more, no less. His two teammates, Shisui and Itachi, however did not get that luxury. They were in the thick of it, and under a heavy amount of suspicion. Itachi especially, when it was discovered Danzo had a particular interest in him, and they had met before.

But if this had something to do with Suna, then all of that meant nothing.

"This report came in three days ago from Suna," The Hokage starts, "it reads; A bounty hunter came to Suna to collect on Sasori the Red Sand, a Suna missing-nin with known ties to the organization, Akatsuki," The Hokage looks up from under his hat. Kakashi remains still. He knows those names, had Sasori's file tucked away in the recesses of his brain. Akatsuki wasn't as well known, but it felt familiar.

"The bounty hunter had foxes accompany him, though he claimed they were not summons, and they did not seem to obey his orders. Five of them were red foxes, and two were fennec foxes." The Hokage pauses here.

"That is...odd." Kakashi says politely. He rolls onto his heels then back to his toes. Shinobi were odd though, everyone knew that. The general gist of it was the stronger the shinobi, the stranger and more wild they were. A bounty hunter with a pack of wild foxes? That was tame. But there was a catch, there was always a catch.

"The man did not offer a name, but when asked, he did not deny that he was undoubtedly Uchiha." Kakashi stills then, ice in his veins. And what a catch that is. "The Kazekage swears that the man looked and acted like an Uchiha, and he quotes the bounty hunter saying 'Uchiha or not, Konoha has never been my home.'" The Hokage sighs deeply. "These are strange times we live in."

Kakashi nods solemnly, it's the only thing he can think to do. His mind whirls. First, desperately, clinging to nothing but spider threads, he thinks of Obito. Then he dismisses that thought instantly. It feels like thorns to think like that. "What is my mission, exactly?" Kakashi asks instead, killing the shaky quiver at the tail end of his voice.

"I want you to track down this bounty hunter, to see for yourself if he really is Uchiha. And if he is, determine what his real intentions are. And if he's no threat to the safety of Konoha, then it's only appropriate that we offer him a place within his clan. You'll be going not as anbu, but as yourself."

Kakashi raises an eyebrow. That was rare for him. “And...if he’s not Uchiha? If he’s a threat?”

“If he’s not Uchiha, and no harm to Konoha, then it's no longer our business. If he *is* a threat, then do not engage in a fight, come straight back to Konoha and we will proceed from there.”

Kakashi mulls it over. “Maybe I ask...why Shisui and Itachi will not be joining me on this mission? They’re Uchiha.”

“That’s exactly why. Uchiha are tight knit, and yet this one has slipped through all our fingers, even theirs. They’ll want answers for different reasons. Blood related reasons. It could swing their judgement for or against the bounty hunter. You know the Uchiha, as much as an outsider can, but I trust you’ll be level headed with this, that you’ll put the interest of the whole village before any one clan.” Kakashi doesn’t deny that. He thinks Itachi could be the same as him though. He doesn’t voice his thoughts.

“When should I leave?”

“As soon as possible.”

* * *

Izuna watches the flames lick up stone walls. Sees the smoke billow in huge black plumes, choking the clean air and browning the surrounding leaves. He pokes the black ashes with the tip of his katana, stirring up the underlying embers that smolder in the dirt. The cave entrance had once been blocked by a thick slab of brown stones. Izuna had dealt with it quickly enough, then flushed out all the half-experiments and innocent parties out into the woods. Izuna’s creating demons. Onces that would want to hunt him, those who are loyal to Orochimaru, and those who would blame him for their future hardships.

He’d been thorough with this place, but it wasn’t the one he was looking for.

It was the one he remembered the most.

Izuna burns it all. Every scroll, every data point, every map and tapestry, anything that was there was now the ash under his feet. There were bodies too. Materials of dead shinobi that would inevitably be used for Edo Tensei. But his two main targets, Orochimaru and Kabuto, are not there.

It's the third hideout he’s hollowed out. He’s been all over Fire country at this point, slowly closing off Orochimaru’s escape routes. He knows the choke point is somewhere between Konoha and Oto, near the Valley of The End. The ghosts from there are like a dull ache, the pull of an old wound. He doesn’t know what will happen when he sees that place again. But

in the meantime, Izuna needs to burn every drop of information Orochimaru has on Edo Tensei.

And maybe save some lives in the process.

Maybe create some monsters on the side.

He's interrupted by paws stampeding on his back, effectively breaking his trance and nearly landing him face first into the dust. He curses at his foxes, but they scatter away before he can exact his wrath. Aka chuckles when he shoots her a particularly venomous glare.

He counts all five of the reds. They look at him with wild eyes and smirking muzzles. The two fennec are ever-present in his cloak. He feels paws on his back again. Izuna whips around.

Karasu beams up at him, dark and smoky ashes burning at his paws. Between his teeth is a dulling slip of paper, brown and black around the edges. Karasu swishes his tails, and Izuna is drawn to those instead. Who wouldn't be? He was still reeling from the fox's true nature.

"What do you want, little traitor?" he snaps at him, but like all his foxes, Karasu reads him easily enough. He's not mad. How could he be? Instead, the fox pads right up to him and spits the paper at his feet. Izuna picks it up slowly, already dreading whatever is written. He knows who it's from. There's only one creature Izuna knows that can tame a fox enough to get it to play messenger. Before he can unfold the paper, Karasu darts away. He blends perfectly into the darkened, burnt, vegetation.

When he leaves, the others return. Gin and Yuki start rolling around in the warm ash, as if there was no danger of catching their fur on fire. "Reckless idiots…" Izuna mutters. He daps Aka's nose. "What about you? Are you an idiot?" Aka stares at him with a dull expression. Izuna scoffs.

He settles down in what's left of his chaos, and unfurls the paper. Bits of charcoal float down into his lap, covering his cloak in black dust. The writing is a shock to his system. It's Naruto's. Vaguely. There's swoops in some of the characters that he knows to be Naruto's. Izuna takes a moment to study the words without really reading them. He runs his fingers along the edges of letters, only for them to smear into nothing, so he stops.

He takes it in.

He breathes in deep.

Then he reads.

Kurama, he finds out pretty quick, is an idiot. Well. He knew that, but Izuna had his doubts. Now though, he can for sure say that Kurama was a moron, through and through. Naruto must've rubbed off on him more than Izuna had thought, and *that* was painful to even consider, so he stops thinking about it all together. But Kurama wants him to go west. *Again.* Specifically to Taki. To nab their jinchuuriki, like that'd ever work. Taki was a tiny hidden village, in a tiny country, and yet they had their own jinchuuriki. There's a reason for that.

Technically, he could. Izuna knows he could sneak into Taki and take the jinchuuriki, steal off into the night and meet Kurama in Steam or Frost. But Izuna's still got his own job to do. His own score to settle and list to cross off. And from what he can tell, the jinchuuriki is a kid. He's a bounty hunter now, not a kidnapper.

He looks at Aka, who suddenly lunges forward and snaps her teeth on the paper before Izuna can react. "Hey!" the paper tears. Izuna sets his half on fire. Aka eats the rest. He growls at her, she laughs at him.

"Kurama thinks he can boss me around," He says seriously. Tama and Mimi trot up to him, pulling away his attention. Tama has something in his mouth, but Izuna doesn't have the mental energy to wrestle him for it right now. He lets Mimi pull at his cloak. He'll need a new one soon enough. He wonders, amusingly, if the same cloak still exists in Uzushio in this timeline.

Thing is, smuggling a jinchuuriki was the easiest way to paint a big red target on his back, for both Akatsuki and the hidden villages. If he involves himself, Suna will want his head as well, then Konoha because of their close ties. He'll be hunted, again, while he's hunting. The first time around was not fun, despite what younger Sasuke would say. Old Sasuke- *Izuna* doesn't want this. He doesn't want to make enemies of the villages, not after all Naruto had tried to teach him.

Then again, Kurama was the one asking. Kurama was his last tie to the old time, to the other side, even to his Naruto. He is Izuna's only ally in this fight, and in his own twisted way, is trying to save his family. He's just Izuna all over again, and Izuna would be a hypocrite if he told him to fuck off. Izuna already killed Danzo, already set his relations with Konoha on rocky grounds, even if Konoha never finds out. So, despite the odds, and how terrible of an idea it all is, Izuna's inclined to help.

The problem is Taki. Izuna's never been there, but from what he vaguely knew was that Taki is small and powerful, a tight-knit group of strong shinobi in a small land, dangerously close to Ame. Izuna would need an in.

While Izuna tries to think of a way to respond—he sees Karasu pacing around him, lighting things on fire and swishing his twin tails—Tama starts smacking him with his paws. Izuna ignores him at first, but then it gets incessant.

"Stop it," He mutters as he pulls out some leftover paper and his ink bottle. Tama doesn't. He puts his face under Izuna's nose, forcing him to look at the fox. "What do you want?" Izuna snaps. "I'm busy."

Tama spits out the thing in his mouth, right onto the blank paper. Izuna wrinkles his nose. It's a dead bird. "Why don't you just eat that?" Tama sits in front of him. Izuna sighs, and puts down his brush. The paper's ruined anyway. As much as he's fond of the foxes, they were sometimes so strange. He rolls the bird away and crumples up the blank paper, annoyed. Tama pushes the bird back to him, his tail wags excitedly.

Izuna studies the fox. He watches his ears twitch forward attentively, the flick of his tail, his whiskers pointing forward, the keen look in his amber eyes as the flit from Izuna's hands to

his face. *Oh,* it dawns on him slowly. *It's a gift, or the start of a trade.* It hits him all at once.

"Guess I'm the idiot here," Izuna snorts. He rubs Tama between the ears and easily chars the bird to a crisp. The fox trots away happily, and goes to share it with Aka. Give Taki a gift. Or, in Izuna's case, the head of their most notorious missing-nin.

Izuna starts writing.

Chapter End Notes

Wow this chapter took like no time to write!
It got me out of my writers block horrah!
I've got the next two and a half chapters written, so with some fine tuning they'll be out shortly!

Thank you for reading this chapter, comments and kudos always appreciated! <3

A Meeting Long Overdue

Chapter Summary

Izuna--because it's Izuna now--fights Kakuzu and meets a certain someone

Chapter Notes

T/W: Slight panic attack at the last paragraph

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Izuna sees Kakashi for the first time in years, he stops dead in his tracks. His shock of silver-white hair is just visible in the tree line, along with his trademark lopsided Hitai-ate. He’s crouched in the branches, stock still when he spots Izuna. Suddenly, he’s twelve again. He’s chasing the jingle of soft bells. He’s sharing food with his new teammates. He’s chasing cats and pulling weeds. He’s traveling to wave and seeing him fight for real, feels the cold dread of Zabuza’s bloodlust, the freezing chill of Haku’s needles piercing through his skin. He’s tumbling in a heap with his new friends, wrestling and sparring like twelve year olds should. He’s in the forest of death getting marked. Kakashi sealed that first curse. And then it's Kakashi teaching him chidori, telling him that his friends are already dead. He’s Sasuke again, for a span of a millisecond.

Then he gets punted straight into the side of a cliff. Izuna growls, annoyed that he’d been so easily distracted from his fight. Kakuzu was a bitch. He pries his arms free from the crumbling earth and quickly shakes off the ache in his back. He can’t focus on ghosts right now, no matter how much Kakashi’s mere presence tugs at the back of his mind. Even as he leaps back into the swirls of grey tendrils that make up Kakuzu’s body, he’s distracted now. He slashes through the material, but it's been proven futile so far.

In reality, Izuna has been waiting for Kakuzu to show his last mask. The water mask. He’s cut up the last three, the fire and wind ones being particularly hard. And the water mask was the natural opposite to his fire. He wasn’t looking forward to dragging this out any further. If he were alone, in the middle of nowhere, without *Kakashi of all people* watching over his shoulder like a silent hawk, he'd have used his rinnegan to finish Kakuzu in a deceive blow that would pierce his heart, and bait the water mask into revealing itself.

Alas, he’ll have to do it the hard way, an ungraceful hack-and-slash aided by three susano’o ribs to act as a shield. When he first pulls on the purple chakra manifestation, Kakuzu hesitates for a moment, and Izuna uses that to his advantage. Kakuzu aims for his head, and the grey threads slam into sunsaso’o full force. Izuna slips underneath, then dodges three

separate attacks. He gets close enough to see the flash of fear in Kakuzu's eyes before a wall of water blasts him back a couple of paces. Izuna throws his arms forward, feeling through the water until he hits porcelain. He flashes through a series of hand signs, pressing his fingertips down, leaving a brand.

The water resides, along with the mask and the strange creature it's attached to. Kakuzu bounces around him, taking the fight a bit more cautious now that he's seen Izuna's chakra armor. He's only down to two lives, afterall, and Izuna hides his exhaustion well enough.

The truth is, Izuna is bone tired. Only sheer will power is keeping him standing, and that burning hatred for all things black and red with clouds all over. He pretends that Kakuzu is someone more familiar, someone more sinister, because he's never met this man before, and has no real connection, save for the people that Kakuzu works for. So he morphs him into Madara, into Orochimaru, into Danzo, anyone he can to make this as personal as possible. It's like eating embers, and his lungs are burning for this to end.

"I've never seen you before. You're not listed in the bingo book, nor any blackmarket bounties-" Kakuzu grumbles out as they circle each other. Izuna steadies his breathing, keenly aware of the silver shadow hovering in the trees. He tries not to look, tries not to think of him. He can't allow himself that. Not in a fight. Not against someone like Kakuzu. "I thought you were just some snot-nosed idiot, but I see that you're worth more than you look."

Izuna bares his teeth. "Don't make this more than it is. All I want is your head."

Kakuzu narrows his strange green eyes. "For a bounty, or have I killed someone of yours and this is some gloated revenge?"

Izuna pictures Madara, rising from the dead. He pictures red and black eyes and a waterfall of black hair. He pictures death. The bodies piled so high, and the air choked with ash. He sees Kakashi laying amongst the dead, with Naruto reaching down to take the bells, to hold them tight.

The bells on Izuna's katana don't chime without reason. When he hears the sweet ring he spins on his heels, striking right through the forehead of the water mask. It shudders to a halt. The mask parts on either side of Izuna's blade, and the creature dissolves into nothing.

Kakuzu lets out a frustrated snarl, and gets the jump on him while his back is turned. Izuna's no fool. Glowing purple ribs form like a cage around him. They catch Kakuzu's angry attack, and allow Izuna enough time to whirl around and finally. Finally end this battle.

Izuna lights his blade with chidori. The chirp of birds is the greatest song he's ever known. He pierces through Kakuzu's heart, pushing the blade all the way through. There's a sputter and gasp, then a well of blood rushes from the wound, coating his front and Izuna's hands. Izuna makes sure to look him in the eyes as he dies. "You were part of a bigger plan, one that I can't let happen." He whispers. Kakuzu's response is nothing but a gurgle of blood.

When he finally slumps forward, becoming nothing but dead weight, Izuna quickly pulls his blade out of the gorey mess he made. He takes one deep breath, then all the hate drains out of

him in one go, and he falls to his knees. “Aka, where are you?” He calls into the surrounding sparse trees. “Aka, it’s okay now, fight’s over.” Izuna holds his breath, like he always finds himself doing, in that space between calling for his foxes and when they appear. The thought of them one day not answering his calls is almost a crippling fear at this point.

But then Aka’s face pops out between the bushes, and she quickly surveys the pockmarked, scorched and wind-marred-glade-turned-wasteland. Izuna’s not proud that the pretty forest landscape on the steep side of this mountain had been reduced to nothing but blackened grass and toppled trees, but the dead Akatsuki at his feet was *almost* worth it.

Almost.

Aka bounds up to him and licks the drops of blood from his face. The rest follow her once the coast has been made clear. Gin and Yuki have Kurome and Hokori riding them like horses. It was the best thing he’s seen all day, and it brings him to quiet, tired laughter.

But it’s not over yet. Of course it’s not. Because his old sensei is stalking him in the trees, and Izuna has no idea what he wants. *They figured out it was me.* It’s his first thought. His second sounds suspiciously like the Kazekage. *Konoha won’t see you as just a threat, they’ll see you as a prize.*

What really surprises him is that Kakashi’s not dressed in anbu. Despite his sensei being selective and avoidant about his past, Izuna knows *for a fact* that at this time, he was an anbu captain. Itachi was on his team.

Before he can brood any longer, Gin lets out a familiar growl, right before she lunges forward and sinks her teeth into the side of Kakuzu’s face. Izuna gags. “Are you serious?!” He grabs her by the muzzle and pries her mouth open, grimacing at the gore she’s made. “If you’ve made him unrecognizable, we’re gonna have some problems.” Luckily, most of his features remain intact.

“Would you please help by gathering the masks?” He asks as politely as he can. Mimi and Tama are the only two that comply, while Gin busies herself by licking the blood around Kakuzu’s pierced heart. “You’re incredibly gross, did you know that?” He makes faces at her, and she makes faces back before the group breaks into cackling laughter.

He bends over Kakuzu’s body and quickly raids any leftover ryo the man stashes in his cloak. He comes up with a neat stack of bills and a purse of heavy coins. He gives the purse to Yuki, and the fox carries it around smuggly. Izuna gets to work on sealing Kakuzu’s body. While he does, he’s incredibly aware of Kakashi staring down at him with his single sharingan. Izuna’s too tired to keep his spinning, but even without the extra senses, he knows. Kakashi must’ve realized his cover was blown, so clearly this was just some intimidation tactic. *Or he’s too emotionally incompetant to try and talk to you.* Izuna scoffs to himself. He wonders how strange he looks, covered in blood, surrounded by foxes, writing Uzushio-native seals on his scrolls—not that Kakashi would know that, right?

Izuna finishes with a shaky sigh. His limbs feel like lead. His whole body aches, and he’s tired. He can’t wait to just lie down and sleep for a couple hours. Once Kakuzu’s main body is sealed away, and the blood on his hands has been thoroughly cleaned by Gin, he takes a

moment to look for his sensei again. The trees surrounding the glade are tall and bushy. The leaves obscure shapes, and the shadows do the rest.

He finds Kakashi to his left, the side that he would assume is Izuna's blind side. He stares at the man for a while, working out how to say something. Anything. He draws a blank, one that feels like thunder clouds rolling through his stomach. He's nauseous just thinking about speaking to this Kakashi. He's not *Sasuke's* Kakashi. He's not his sensei, not yet, not ever again. And that realization alone is painful enough for his throat to close and form a pit of nothing at the base of his lungs. Izuna clenches his jaw to keep himself from breaking. He can't. He's not allowed that.

Instead, he waits. He waits and he stares. He knows Kakashi will inevitably break this stupid act. He knows that he'll forgo the 'stealth' approach because his cover's been blown to hell and back.

But Izuna knows himself too, and after fifteen solid minutes of staring, he can't wait any longer. When he speaks, it's hoarse and snarly, too much fox and so little Uchiha left in him that he can't even pretend to be anything but feral. "Are you gonna stay up there like a fucking creep, or come talk to me?"

Kakashi doesn't move, doesn't even startle. His eyes dart around, clocking in all his foxes. Including Hokori who leaps onto his shoulders to growl at Kakashi, and Kurome who buries himself in the folds of Izuna's cloak. Aka is pacing in front of him, hackles raised. He reaches out a hand and smoothes down her red fur.

It takes a while for Kakashi to make his decision. He slowly, carefully, drops to the ground with the wariness of a prey animal. Izuna keeps himself calm and still. He can feel his heart pounding like a drum against his ribs.

Izuna yearns to be twelve again, to be naive and single-minded, and he wants the days where he almost forgot about revenge. The days where Naruto would tumble into his side and break his rhythm, and when the biggest thing in the world felt like Itachi, and his rivalry with Naruto, and even going on their first c-class mission. Zabuza had felt like a penultimate, and Haku was the best of the best.

Kakashi steps out of the tree line, and hesitates just out of Aka's leaping distance. Izuna pulls her tail to get her to back off, and the fox looks at him dejectedly. "Go find Tama and Mimi," He says gently, she flattens her ears, gives Kakashi one more suspicious glare, then bounds away into the forest. His old sensei seems to relax at that, and Izuna knows why. Aka is like a miniaturized Kurama, down to the fur color and the shape of her ears and the curl of her muzzle.

Izuna tucks Kakuzu's body scroll away. It instantly gets snatched from Izuna's hands by Kurome, who curls around it and disappears back under his cloak. Kakashi stands in front of him, out of his reach by a foot, keeping a good distance. They size each other up again, waiting for the other to make a move. This time, it's Kakashi who breaks first. He lets himself crouch down to Izuna's eye level, but he doesn't sit fully, unlike Izuna. Izuna's so tired, he doesn't think he could move even if he was attacked.

He's about to embark on dangerous territory now. Izuna's been mulling over stories that he could tell, lies to fill in reasons he can't explain. He didn't realize that he'd have to be lying directly to Kakashi though, and wonders if he'll be able to hold up under his scrutiny. They don't say anything for five more minutes. Kakashi's eyes keep flitting away from him, to Gin who licks blood from her fur, and Yuki, who chases the birds and butterflies. Hokori, curled around Izuna's shoulders like a scarf, stares at Kakashi with his huge ears flicking. Kakashi stares at him the most.

He's never been good at speaking, that was Naruto's job. Izuna carefully scoops the fox up with one hand and holds him out like an offering. "Wanna pet him?"

Kakashi's one visible eye twitches. "I...Excuse me, what?" He stutters. Izuna counts that as a win. His mouth almost makes a smile. Kakashi's one eye is a familiar sight, one that aches but he can't help but want to grin, just because he can see him again.

"He won't bite you, if you're worried about that," Izuna says, matter of fact. He's freaking out. He's actually freaking out. So much so that he's shutting down, becoming robotic to the point of nonchalance. It's Izuna's greatest superpower.

Kakashi waves his hands. "I'm good...I uh…um..." It's strange to hear Kakashi trip over his words. Izuna's used to a Kakashi that was calm and cool—sometimes a little weird—in all situations. The only time he's seen him like this was *maybe* when he found out about Obito, but even then, it wasn't like this. Hokori wiggles out of his hands and lands between them. Kakashi flinches back like he'd be attacked.

"You're scared of them." Izuna dead pans. *But Kakashi, you have a pack of ninken. Hokori is smaller than Pakkun!* Izuna bites his tongue to keep himself from laughing. Kakashi doesn't deny it, but looks at him crossly.

"What's your business here, Konoha?" Izuna asks. He best get this out of the way.

Kakashi shifts on his heels. He's ready to run at a moment's notice. He wouldn't get very far, even if he is fast. Izuna surpassed him a year ago. He suspects it to be lies that come from his mouth, but he knows how to tell when Kakashi lies, and what he says are as good as truths. "I've been sent to determine your intentions towards Konoha."

Izuna keeps his face blank. *This isn't about Danzo? Because my intentions were pretty clear-*
"My intentions?" He repeats slowly.

Kakashi raises a single shoulder, calculated to make what he says more relatable. They're not his words, but the words of people above his pay grade. Which, for Kakashi, was very few. "You're an Uchiha, yet you're unknown to the village, and your own clan. It's-"

"Suspicious?" He wonders if he'll be able to lie to Kakashi, even if his life depends on it.

"Strange," Kakashi offers instead, with the upturn of his eye in the fakest smile Izuna's ever seen. That too, is painfully familiar. "The Uchiha's are a tight knit group, they'd have known if one of their own wasn't accounted for." His mouth pulls into a line despite himself. The irony of those words, said by Kakashi himself. He has to keep himself from blurting out the

truths he knows, the lies that have been told, everything. Kakashi catches the slight change in Izuna's expression, and continues, cautious. "There's… also the bounty hunting. The man you were just fighting. He's Akatsuki, right?"

Izuna nods curtly.

"You're...hunting Akatsuki." It's not a question.

"Hn."

Kakashi blinks. "Is it...personal?"

Izuna fiddles with the silent bells on the end of his katana, drawing Kakashi's attention as well. When he sees them, he freezes, a hand instinctively going to the pocket where he keeps his own. Izuna gauges his reaction, the questions swirling in his one eye, the slight furrow in his brow. He can't figure it out, there's too many pieces missing. The air hums with unseen electricity. "Something like that."

"So… you hunt only them?"

Izuna thinks of Danzo. He thinks of Orochimaru and Kabuto. He shrugs. "Something like that." He looks past Kakashi's shoulder as Aka returns with Tama and Mimi, each with broken porcelain masks hanging in their jaws. Izuna instantly abandons Kakashi's questions in favor of his foxes. Kakashi spins on his heel and hops away from their path. He watches, transfixed, as each fox brings Izuna a mask and places them at his feet. "Thank you." Izuna pets them in turn and gives them a strip of dried meat to chew on. Aka easily goes back to playing century, while Tama and Mimi start wrestling over their food.

"Your foxes are...unusual," Kakashi mutters. His hand hovers over his shuriken pouch. "How can you trust them?"

Izuna glares. "I'd rather not fight you, Konoha-san, but if you attempt to hurt any of them, I'll pop that precious eye right from your skull." He channels a little Kurama in his threat, and lets himself revel in the flash of disturbed fear in Kakashi's grey eye. Izuna returns to his normal demeanor. "Think of them like dogs, if they freak you out so much."

He picks up the porcelain shards of the fire mask, inspecting them. Kakuzu's technique was a gruesome mystery to him. He was both curious and repulsed by how it works. The piece he has is the right half on the mask. He holds it up to his face. It stinks of blood and ash. They're familiar in all the wrong ways.

"What should I call you, Konoha-san?" Izuna asks, softly. *Just give me your anbu name, or your stupid title, copy-nin. I can't call you Kakashi, I can't-*

"Kakashi Hatake."

Izuna swears internally. But there's no time for that, because Kakashi is staring at him expectantly. Izuna forgets how to breathe when he lies. "Izuna Uchiha," he says quietly, barely a whisper.

Kakashi's one eyebrow disappears under his Hitai-ate. "That's a powerful name you got there." Izuna snorts, thinking of Kurama again. He puts the mask down and shuffles the pieces into a big pile. When he pulls back his cloak to grab a scroll, he can tell Kakashi glares right at Kurome. Kurome makes a sound like a scream around the scroll.

Izuna flicks his nose lightly. "Don't get teeth marks in the seal." He begins working on a second storage scroll. Without any organic matter, it was much simpler. Kakashi starts rattling off questions while he works.

"Do you have a village?"

"Nope."

"Were you raised in Konoha?"

"No." *Yes, but not really.* It's easy, painfully easy, to separate himself from Konoha. He hasn't been there since he was thirteen.

Kakashi tilts his head, silver hair flopping over half his face. "Then… where did an Uchiha like you come from?"

"My mother, I assume," Izuna bites back to be an ass.

Kakashi's eye rolls. "You know what I mean."

Izuna sets down his brush and starts picking through the shards. There's a moment when he considers taking the most in-tact mask, the lighting one, to wear himself. He decides against it when he catches another whiff of smoke and blood. He doesn't know if the smell will ever wash out. It's better to give them back to Taki for a bigger profit.

"I was…" Izuna flashes a few hand signs, "We were nomadic." He thinks of Naruto when he says it. He thinks of Konoha going up in a huge fireball. He thinks of the weeks they would run, the few nights they would sleep, and all the death that followed them. At first, when they came across small towns and the most hidden of the hidden villages, they'd be welcomed with open arms. *Saviors, warriors,* they were called. And then Madara would sniff them out each time. And soon they were the omens of back luck. *Warbringers.* Madara followed them because they were the two who could kill him. They blazed a trail of death and blood after them.

Kakashi doesn't say anything while Izuna frowns down at the shards in his hands. There's a swell of grief that washes up like an unexpected tide, and when it recedes there are shells of hatred, digging into the sides of his sandy lungs. He takes a deep, rattling breath, coming back to himself, back to this side of time.

"I'll see you on the other side."

Where? Izuna wants to scream. *Where are you?* He finishes the seal. The masks are absorbed into the scroll, and he snaps the cloth shut. He tucks it next to Kurome. "Any more

questions?" Izuna says bitingly. Kakashi gives him a look, one that conveys that this particular line of conversation is not over.

Kakashi points to the scrolls. "What do you plan on doing with them?"

Izuna stares at the man. *Is he for real, or just testing me?* "Kakuzu's bounty goes to Taki, so that's where I'm heading." *And to—perhaps—spirit away a certain jinchuuriki.* That would depend more on the jinchuuriki themself, and Kakashi. The plans will have to be changed. Izuna scans the treeline, looking for a hint of shadowy fur or purple fire.

"And then? Do you know where the other Akatsuki are?" Kakashi leans forward, genuinely curious instead of his fake formality.

Izuna's eyebrow creeps up. "Vaguely." They were currently in Oto. He was close to Orochimaru's future hidden village, only a day's travel east. Though, the town was nothing more than a small civilian village, and Orochimaru had yet to raise his head from the ground. It frustrates Izuna to no end that he can't burn out the snakes in the mud.

He draws lazy patterns in the dust as he speaks. "They like to hang out in the smaller countries. Less eyes. Less powerful shinobi. Less people who actually *care* about anything like that. I guess I'll go back to tracking them."

He stands and swipes the dust off his cloak. Mimi dives for the hem of it, but Izuna's quick enough to snatch the fabric away from him before he gets the chance. He bares his teeth in a vicious grin down at him, and the fox mimics it. To Kakashi he says, "I have to work carefully. Hunt them too fast and they'll disappear, even from me. Too slow and...well…" *Then this would've been for nothing, and Kurama* will *kick my ass if any of his siblings get caught.*

Kakashi doesn't make a move while he gathers up his things. Izuna wonders what to do with his once-sensei. Hell, he barely knows what to do with himself. It's been a few months, most of them alone. Another person feels like trouble.

"Let me accompany you."

Izuna curses silently. He looks over his shoulder at Kakashi. He wants to tell him to fuck off. No, that's not right. There are alarm bells ringing in his heart. He can't have Kakashi trailing after him when he steals a jinchuuriki. And besides the obvious, Izuna's not ready to face this particular ghost. He hasn't spent enough time as Izuna. How is he going to continue lying to his old sensei? *At least Konoha didn't send Itachi.* But somehow, he knows he won't be able to refute him. Not really. "Why? Isn't your mission over?"

"Not exactly," Kakashi stands up and dusts off the front of his jacket. He tilts his head much like a curious dog. "You see, I was tasked with determining several things, actually. Whether you're Uchiha or not, for one," Izuna glares, "you are, no doubt about it! Then when it comes to Konoha, I'm supposed to assess if you're a threat."

Izuna snorts and rolls his eyes. How fitting. There was a time and place where he was wanted by every nation. There was a time and place he became the thing he hated the most. Izuna

starts walking, and Kakashi easily bounds to walk beside him, though he keeps a good distance between them. Enough so that Izuna can't stick him with his katana. "And? If I'm not?"

Kakashi shrugs. "Then I offer you a place in Konoha. You're Uchiha, nomadic or not, the rest of your clan is there."

Izuna bites the inside of his cheek. *His clan.* He saved them by killing Danzo, of course they're *still there.* It feels weird. It feels wrong. "You're being awfully transparent about this whole situation," he says tentatively, like the truth of the matter was as fragile as glass.

"Well, lying isn't a very good way to establish trust, now is it?"

Izuna stares at him for a long time. Then he breaks down laughing. He laughs until he's not anymore. Until everything that has happened since he got dumped on this side of time smacks him like a punch to his lungs. Until there's tears at the corners of his eyes and he can barely breathe. Until his lungs ache and his brain feels like cotton. Until he falls over and stares at the sky like the universe left him answers he just can't see. He's smiling and he's sobbing, and nothing will be okay, not ever again. Kakashi says something and he can't hear it, not over his own heaving breaths. Not over the ringing in his ears that gets louder and louder. Until it's everything, and he's nothing.

Nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this chapter! I've realized that this story is going to be way longer than intended, so for those who stick it out until the very end, I'm applauding you in advance! Next chapter will be out soon.

Comments and kudos always appreciated! <3

The Bells

Chapter Summary

Kakashi's POV while they travel to Taki

Chapter Notes

no beta we die like Naruto

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi kind of hates himself. He stands and watches Izuna have a panic attack right in front of him, and he does absolutely nothing. Infact, he's frozen to the spot, because what else is he supposed to do? He's sure that if he tries to intervene he might get a limb ripped off, impaled, or maybe Izuna *will* follow through on his previous threat and gouge out his sharingan. So he stands stock still, and listens to Izuna crumple onto the dirt and grass and gasp at air like he'll never get enough of it.

His foxes are not so idle, and they dogpile Izuna as soon as his back hits the ground. The big red one goes to lick his face and nip at his hands, but it does nothing. And Kakashi wonders if this is his fault. He'd said something, hadn't he? He'd accidentally triggered this, and now he watches as Izuna, who was a fearsome shinobi, a *warrior,* only moment ago, be reduced to nothing but tears and fox paws. It's a sight, and Kakashi wants to look away for Izuna's sake or for his own. Because he's seen these kinds of things and they're always horrible, and he always does nothing about it.

Luckily for both of them, it takes Izuna a remarkably fast time to calm down. Once his breathing slows into a deep rhythm, his face turns into a terrifyingly blank mask. All of the conflicting, agonizing emotions on his face are packed up neatly and tucked away. The big fox screams in his face, and that's enough to kickstart Izuna into getting up and shooing the foxes off his chest.

Kakashi stands there awkwardly. He can already tell that neither of them are going to acknowledge what just happened. Selfishly he's okay with that, but he knows it's wrong to ignore those kinds of things. He ignores them all the time.

When Izuna stands, he doesn't look at Kakashi, only turns and continues vaguely westward, towards Taki, Kakashi assumes. There's not a pause in his step, not even an acknowledgement of him as he rushes forward to keep up.

They stay silent for the rest of the day.

* * *

Kakashi learns a lot about Izuna when he stops asking questions. Mainly Because Izuna hardly speaks besides what is necessary. He observes, like any good shinobi would, and finds all the little cracks and pressure points in Izuna's nye impenetrable armor. And it *is* an impressive shield, but no one—not even himself, not even Itachi—has a perfect mask.

The cracks in his mask come first in the form of his seven foxes. They swirl around him, and he smiles down at them. He lets them nibble at his hands and pull at his cloak and run around with kunai in their mouths, much to Kakashi's horror. He yells at them sometimes, but never mean spirited, more like an exasperated older brother, or a babysitter. He remembers vividly when the big fox called Aka was caught red-pawed eating all of Kakashi's rations, and Izuna has chased her off shouting "Get lost you fucking free loader!" While she and the rest of the foxes laughed mockingly, and threw all the scraps in the air.

He never did apologize on her behalf, simply offered up his own rations under the guise of "I'll buy more in the next town."

Kakashi learns through the foxes that Izuna is not cruel, but he's not warm either. More than anything, he's awkward and depressed. He's not wary of Kakashi though, but to Izuna he can't be much of a threat. Kakashi saw him fight already and he's not too confident he could take him one on one.

The second crack comes in the form of his appearance. At first, Kakashi thought nothing of his looks. He thought it was the typical Uchiha black and white with some hints of red or blue, but on closer inspection, Izuna's cloak is patterned in delicate waves that shimmer iridescently like crow feathers. Kakashi's never seen the pattern before, and he wonders where he got it, where that pattern originated from. He doesn't ask.

Next is his stupidly ornate katana. And for this, Kakashi's curiosity gets the best of him. He works up the courage one dusk, while they cook fish from the river over a small fire. Izuna sits with his legs crossed, writing something over his knee. If Kakashi moves just too close, he'll move the paper away. Another mystery, it seems.

Who could he be writing to? He says that he's alone. Or he's just a liar. Viable. Kakashi doesn't like to think about it.

"That katana," he starts. Izuna tenses automatically. *So it's a personal subject? Not just a tool?* Sentimentality was not the shinobi's way. "It's special right? Not just with its decorations, but it's got seals all over it."

Izuna puts his brush pen down and rolls the paper up. Kakashi can't get a glimpse of the words. When the Uchiha moves, it's silent. He reaches over and pulls the katana into his lap,

then shows Kakashi a bit of the blade. It's a dull black, eerily dark, perfect for shadows. Practical.

For a minute, Izuna doesn't say a word. He wrinkles his brow and opens and closes his mouth in a few false starts, like he can't find a good place to begin. "It conducts lightning," he says. He pauses, elaborates slowly, "I can use lightning affinity, so I channel my chakra through the handle, and the seals help control and amplify that."

Kakashi just nods, but that's not exactly what he's getting at. He points at the tsuba handguard, which is engraved with a small fox with a spiral on its forehead, and a branch of sakura blossoms. "Foxes again huh? And I thought Uchiha has a pact with cats."

Izuna snorts. "The foxes weren't my thing, really," Kakashi raises his eyebrow. It takes a while for Izuna to continue. Kakashi can see a mental battle raging in the twitch between his brows, and the line of his mouth. But in the end, he does tell.

With a sigh, he rubs his thumb over the little metal fox, "these two here are for my teammates," He stops on the fox, "this one is the person who gave the katana to me." There's so much pain and longing and *grief* that overwhelms Izuna's face in those words that Kakashi gets the implications loud and clear. Whoever gifted the katana was more than just a teammate.

He keeps going. Kakashi thinks that if he had stopped there, he would have stayed stopped for a long time. He turns the katana to show the handle, the metal piece before the wrap is branded with the Uchiha crest, "I don't think I need to explain that one," Izuna says.

The menuki charms are metal crow feathers. Izuna hovers over them as well. "These are for my brother," he says simply, and doesn't continue. And then...Kakashi catches sight of those dreaded bells again. Izuna watches him closely, but doesn't say a word.

"Where did those bells come from?" he asks quietly. All he gets in return is that horrendously smug and secretive half smile that flits onto Izuna's face every once in a while. Like everything is an inside joke and Kakashi's just too blind to see it.

Izuna flicks the bells and they don't make a sound. He deflects the question entirely. Kakashi's partially annoyed that it's only now that Izuna's defenses start kicking into high gear.

If everything on the sword is a representation of someone, then who are the bells?

"They don't make noise unless I use a specific seal, then they'll ring whenever the thing I tag gets close."

That is impressive though. It's almost the same flavor as Minato's favorite jutsu. While he mulls that over, Izuna's expression morphs into something a bit more mischievous. "Here, test it out," Izuna suddenly unsheathes the katana and offers Kakashi the hilt. There's a glint in his eye that Kakashi doesn't like, but he does as he says.

At first, he wonders if the weapon is alive. It practically hums with chakra. But the second Izuna's fingers stop touching the metal, Kakashi's arms are yanked downwards with enough force to send him to the dirt. The sword is as heavy as a mountain. Izuna snickers, and all the foxes join in a cacophony of laughter. Kakashi lets go and glares up at the Uchiha. "What the hell was that for?"

Izuna easily scoops up his katana and swings it around in a few lazy circles. "For asking questions. And it was just funny, you have to admit," Izuna says, still shaking with quiet chuckling. Only after Kakashi grumbles about being an asshole, does he show Kakashi how it actually works.

"More seals," Kakashi guesses correctly, just as Izuna holds up his left inner forearm to show him a large rectangular seal with lines of sprawling, complicated texts that wrap all the way around his wrist and elbow.

"Think of it like a lock and key. Anyone with this lock can use the katana," Izuna explains.

"So you weren't the only one."

Izuna lifts a shoulder. "It's a bit inconvenient that your comrades can't even retrieve your tools for you in the middle of a battle."

Teammates that he no longer has, apparently. Izuna is alone as far as Kakashi can tell. As far as he's said. Hell, who hunts Akatsuki alone if they have comrades they could otherwise rely on? Was his team killed by the group? Kakakshi notices a faded crescent moon tattoo in the middle of his palm, but the moment Izuna catches him looking he closes his hand and glares at him again. *Eesh. Touchy.* He's the same way. No wonder everyone's done with his shit 24/7.

"Are you a fuuinjutsu master?" Kakashi guesses, but all he gets is a heavy frown. *I guessed wrong then.*

"I…" Izuna traces the lines on his forearm, his sharingan spins to life suddenly, studying it. "No. I have all the useful ones copied, but I never studied up on the theory of creating them...It's possible I could reverse engineer some, but it was never my thing."

Kakashi picks up on that instantly. "Just like your foxes huh."

When Izuna smiles it's sad, quiet, a storm raging in his one eye and lightning running under his skin. Kakashi knows, has known for a while, that he's stepping on toes here, walking on glass shards, any question could be his last. If he pushed too far, if he made one wrong move, it could be over for this tentative alliance forming between them.

But this wasn't one of those times, because when Izuna smiles it means it's fine. "You're surrounded by things that aren't yours," he says.

"Ghosts," Izuna clarifies. "It's all ghosts," he says on a long, tired sigh. "Everything I wear, every weapon I carry, every fox, every tattoo...this mission, my *purpose*… it's all them, all these people that I...that I carry around because it's like I'm the only one who will."

Oh. it clicks in Kakashi's brain a bit late. *He's like me...only he's in the thick of it, and there's no one else to save him.*

"I'm...sorry." Kakashi mutters. It sounds weak, he curses internally. He's powerless in the face of *emotions.* He hates it. He wants something to chase down, but that was the worst thing about loss, is that chasing down the demons never led anywhere, only further down, further into hatred.

But Izuna just turns and pokes the fire that was forgotten, their food half burned to charcoal. "Ghosts aren't bad. Hell, they're not always from the dead," Izuna starts. He's scowling into the fire like he's trying to convince himself. "They can be from friends or family or someone you love. Maybe a complete stranger. Someone who leaves their mark on you. Maybe it's a tattoo like mine, or just the way you make your ramen. Those are ghosts too."

"Guess we all got ghosts," Kakashi mutters. Obito. Rin. Minato. Kushina. People he's failed. Might Guy comes to mind, someone who saved him, who left his mark. Itachi, Shisui, Tenzo. His team. His life.

Kakashi stares at those bells on the end of Izuna's katana.

* * *

"When we get to Taki, I'm going by myself," Izuna says, matter of fact, like it's already been decided.

Kakashi scoffs, offended and taken aback and confused all at the same time. "What? When did we discuss this?"

"Just now."

"No, not just now," Kakashi gripes. They've been traveling for a week and Kakashi thinks he's finally understood Izuna enough to at least earn his trust. "you're not ghosting me at the last second."

Izuna clicks his tongue. He tilts his head to look down on Kakashi like he's some villain. "What's your business in Taki then? Why are *you* going?"

"Because you are!"

"I'm not some child who needs constant supervision y'know," Izuna snaps, then he pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. It's expressive. It's not at all how he was only a week ago. He'd gotten surprisingly comfortable around him after that night talking about ghosts and seals. "Okay, start over. First, you're only here to get a read on my personality, basically, you're scouting me to be a part of Konoha."

Kakashi blinks. "Correct."

“And what makes you think I want to *be* a part of Konoha?”

Kakashi narrows his eye sceptically. Izuna’s face is twisted into a mulish scowl, childish and stubborn and making him look a lot younger than what he probably was—not that he was that old to begin with. “You’re not serious. You decided when you let me tag along in the first place.”

Izuna’s scowl deepens, Kakashi has him pinned. He takes a surprising amount of glee for finally getting the one-up on him. All week, it had been Izuna siking him out with stupid mind games and exacting subtle pranks if he pushed too far.

“Whatever, it’s all up in the air anyway. That is if I live that long.” Izuna says flippantly. Kakashi’s internal alarm bells blare. He’s heard that language before and it makes his stomach drop. He almost asks, but Izuna steamrolls right over him. “-The point is, right now, I’m not affiliated with any village, and I’d like it to remain that way until my mission is finished. You’re Konoha, and if Taki sees me with you, then they’ll assume *I’m* Konoha as well.” Izuna taps his foot incessantly, Kakashi reads it as anxiousness rather than impatience.

He’s planning something.

“And if something goes wrong...then I don’t want you to take the blame.”

Kakashi opens his mouth to say something, but then closes it. Izuna glares at him for only another second before he turns and starts packing up his things.

“And what could you possibly do for things ‘to go wrong?’ You’re delivering a bounty...not...hell, you’re not assassinating their kage are you?”

Izuna scoffs, his dark eye alight with some inner fire. “No-” and faintly, so quietly Kakashi doesn’t know if he heard it or the wind, Izuna whispers, “not this time.”

Kakashi deflates. Izuna was a problem one way or another. *I can’t tell if he’s joking or not.* “You’re going to need a better reason for me not to come with. Afraid I’ll steal the money huh?”

Izuna’s mouth pulls into a half grimace. The glare he sends Kakashi is all too familiar. *He looks so much like Itachi, it’s uncanny.* “You’re a nuisance.”

“Maa, that’s uncalled for.” Kakashi smiles fakely with his eye.

Izuna sighs heavily, like he’s exhausted. “I have to do this one thing for this... *thing-”*

The pieces click together in Kakashi’s head. “This has to do with whoever you’ve been writing.”

“No it doesn’t,” Izuna says all too quickly. Kakashi stares at him, deadpan, and Izuna backtracks again. He scowls. He’s always scowling at him. It's kind of funny at this point. “Fine! It does, but it’s none of your business. The person I’m doing this for isn’t any threat to Konoha I can assure you that. But do you know who is? Taki. So don’t get involved.”

“What’s the mission?”

Izuna freezes up. Kakashi’s not hopeful about what he’s going to hear. “I’m going to... *rescue* someone.”

“Rescue.” Kakashi repeats slowly. His eyebrow slowly aches upward. He doesn’t have to say anything, Izuna knows he doesn’t believe him.

“Yes,” Izuna grows more comfortable the more he talks, “actually. If they don’t want to leave, then I won’t make them.”

“Then what makes you think they need *‘rescuing?’”*

“I have inside sources.”

Kakashi runs a hand down his face. “You’re about to kidnap someone,” he mutters.

Izuna sputters, “No! I’m not! Because I’m not taking them against their will,” Izuna picks up the last of his things and tucks them all inside a neat scroll. The scroll goes to his belt and into the jaws of a fennec fox. “Think of it more like...I’m giving this person options. Most people don’t get that luxury.”

Options. “That’s a dangerous way of thinking.”

“I’m a dangerous person, what’s new,” Izuna shrugs. He stamps out the fire and scatters the ashes. “I’ll move the seals to a better location for scouting. The moment I come back, we’ll probably have to run. If you’re caught then...guess I started a war.”

“That’s not something you can be so casual about, you know.” It’s not often someone can spark genuine anger in him, not after all these years in a cool nothing brought on by grief and depression. But there’s a general panic that seizes Kakashi at that very moment, and he’s struck by how incredibly reckless this Uchiha is. He tells him.

“The more I get to know you, the less Uchiha I think you act,” he hisses. “And how am *I* supposed to trust this mysterious someone just because *you* say so?”

“Well if you trusted me at all maybe my words would hold more merit,” Izuna snaps back, bitter and striking like a snake’s bite. *Right. Because one week is not enough to establish trust. It’s not enough to know Izuna and what he stands for. It’s not enough to make us teammates. We’re just strangers.* When he catches Izuna’s expression this time, it’s more than just mad, it’s betrayed. And it shocks Kakashi into silence for a few seconds.

Izuna takes his silence and goes with it. “I’ll cut a bargain with you then, if you’re so *keen* on joining me.” Izuna picks through his next words slowly, like he can’t believe he’s saying them. “After this mission...I’ll do it, I’ll join Konoha.” Kakashi tilts his head, *is he serious?* “I’ll be one of your stupid shinobi. I’ll tell you everything I know about Akatsuki. Which, trust me, is a lot more than what anyone else knows. And I know things, lots of things I shouldn’t, things that could change the tide of the future.” He narrows his eyes threateningly. “And all you have to do, Kakashi, is stay. Here.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, it's so hard to write two introverted characters together because!!! They!! Don't!!! Talk!! I personally think they're both a little OOC, but whatever, I can spin it however I want I guess!
I'm also trying so f u c k i n g hard to give Kakashi more dialogue besides just questions but its hard for narrative purposes bc like!! That's what he's supposed to do in this situation so- we'll wring some more character development out of him soon ahaaha.

Sasuke's Katana is oh so very special for ~plot~ and ~aesthetics~ oho I knew I had to give him a cool weapon when I found out katana are often decorated to specifically fit each wielder/swordsmith.

For anyone wondering about katana:

Tsuba is the name of the hand guard, normally they're round or square and you'll often see them with two extra holes that are used to carry around a little knife and sometimes a hairpin!

Menuki are charms that are wrapped in the handle, normally they're above the peg that keeps the wood of of the handle secured to the tang of the blade, and they're for personalization and getting a better grip on the sword, and they're made of metal!

More facts:
Katana get their curve mostly from the firing process. Once the blade is formed, they cover it in wet clay, more on the back end and less on the edge so that they heat at different temperatures to create different densities in the metal, resulting in the curve. (This is also how you get that wavy pattern) This makes the metal harder on the edge and softer on the back end so it's more flexible. The curve also helps stabilize it when striking.

Katana are worn with the edge facing up (which when I found that out I was like, huh...wot) and they're often signed on the tang, which is where I got the idea to write seals on the tang instead eheh.

Underneath a Waterfall

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Time space ninjutsu,” Sasuke says. Mutters, more like. He’s face down on a desk, scrolls spread out under him, piles of books stacked on either side of his face.

“What?” Naruto pokes at his hair, using the tip of his brush pen to dig in and prod at his scalp until Sasuke relents and lifts his head. A bit of parchment sticks to his cheek.

“Where’s the real Naruto?” Sasuke asks instead. He pulls the paper from his face and slowly shuffles the scrolls back into an orderly row. Naruto frowns. Sasuke knows it's a clone, though it's near impossible to tell. He knows. He’ll always know. Between the shelves of the hidden library, there are hundreds of clones. Each one has been delegated a specific task. It makes the whole “learning thing” a bit faster, and Naruto has the chakra to spare at the moment. He’s been stockpiling.

“Why don’t you just tell me?” clone Naruto pouts, Sasuke doesn’t entertain him any longer and stands up from their joint desk. He takes the one scroll he found and heads out. “Wait!”

Sasuke keeps walking. When he’s at the door, the clone calls out, “He’s at the waterfall!”

The Uzushio seal library. Every seal that’s ever been made here finds itself in there at some point or another. If they wanted to find something to fix their problem, it would be there. Naruto’s been scouring it for weeks. When Sasuke exits into the bright afternoon sun, the abandoned city is a sight to behold. Most of the rubble has remained, though some of the most damaged areas were restored enough for them to not be a hazard. Naruto has wanted to flip the entire city, to make it new again, but Sasuke reluctantly talked him out of it to save time.

Time. We just don’t have time.

He finds another batch of clones making unique seals, then another takes them to test far off into the forest. Because it’s not all theory. There’s the practicality of it all, and Naruto learns best through trial and error. Sasuke just hopes he doesn’t accidentally mess with the island's innate borders. There’s an explosion somewhere in the distance followed by a string of curses that Sasuke hears from over the mountain. A huge plume of purple smoke rises from the tree line. The clones liven up the desolate landscape at least.

Sasuke quickly makes his way towards the waterfall. The river runs clear, the stones on the bank are covered in moss, the sun shines brightly through the canopy of brilliant green leaves, golden and unbothered. He can hear the sea, vaguely, lulling his senses to serenity. If only they’d come here on vacation. He could get behind that idea. Uzushio was, if anything, a peaceful place.

And we ruined it.

Naruto sits at the water's edge, staring at a huge scroll sprawling with massive patterns. Sasuke slows to a halt just out of his sight and watches for a minute. Naruto sits hunched over, his brows slightly furrowed, and Sasuke can tell he's scanning the same line over and over again. He makes himself known by walking through the tall grass at the edge of the tree line. Naruto swivels towards him, and his scowl fades to nothing. It makes something warm and fuzzy twist inside his chest.

"What's up?"

Sasuke comes forward and sets himself next to Naruto, as easy as breathing. He stares down at the seal Naruto's working on, but unlike most things, it eludes him.

"Space time ninjutsu," he starts. Naruto tilts his head. "I found this, guess your clones haven't gotten to the 'S' section of the library." Sasuke hands him the scroll.

"No… they're working through the 'Q's' at the moment," Naruto mutters, amused. He unravels the scroll, and his expression freezes. Sasuke puts his chin on Naruto's shoulder to look with him.

"It's familiar, right? I've seen it somewhere," Sasuke says, "so I thought-"

"It's...yeah," Naruto breathes out deeply, "this is...it looks like my dad's 'flying thunder god' seals...but-" Naruto points to a certain section, "-that's different."

"That's the seal he used to teleport, right? The second hokage's the one who first developed it."

"How did it end up here…" Naruto lowers the scroll and lets it droop in the grass. He stays silent for a long second. Sasuke nearly tunes him out, listening to the waterfall, feeling how warm the sun is, and how it was so easy to forget what was on the other side of the storm that protected them. If he just closes his eyes and feel the rise and fall of Naruto's shoulder, he could pretend that nothing was real. Nothing but Naruto and him and this waterfall.

"Hey Sasuke,"

"Hn?"

"Do you want another tattoo?"

Sasuke blinks open his eyes and pulls away. It breaks the illusion. Because a tattoo could be so many things, but to shinobi, to fuuinjutsu masters, tattoos are weapons as much as scrolls. "What, like this one?" He holds out his forearm. It wasn't Naruto's personal work, but it was his idea so he took all the credit.

"Yeah, only this time, it'll link you to me, instead of your katana."

Sasuke holds out his left hand, the moon winks at them. Naruto automatically flexes his right, showing off the sun. "We already have one of those, dobe."

Naruto clicks his tongue, annoyed. Sasuke's getting annoyed at himself that he, for the life of him, can't seem to fully grasp seal theory. "No, not like that, like one of these," He bradishes the space-time seal. "And unlike the sun and moon, it'll be unbreakable. I found this ink in the storage room. It said it stays on the skin even in death."

Sasuke sits up fully, he stares at Naruto, watches those blue eyes turn from hopeful to bashful the longer he looks. "Never mind. It's...it's a stupid idea-"

"No, let's do it," Sasuke says immediately. "What were you thinking?"

"Well," Naruto rubs the back of his neck. "I think it'll be a good intermediate way to test space-time seals. And you know how we work best when we fight together? Well what if we get separated? What if we lose track of one another or need a quick escape? A seal like this could help us. More than help us if we use it right." He draws a few lines in his scroll.

* * *

Izuna reaches up and rubs at his shoulder. It'd been burning lately, that was never a good sign. It meant mischievous things from the resident bastard fox. He glares down at the dark dirt path he's on. It's cramped in the back alleys of Taki, whose buildings are clustered together, stacked on top of each other, and piled so close that back alleys were hardly more than the shadow between walls, and maybe overlapping roofs to shade from the ever present waterfall mist. In his left hand he counts out his new stack of ryo, more than enough to keep him going for much longer than he intends. Kakuzu, strange enough, has been hunted for decades. His bounty had been steadily increasing, then jumped again when it was found he was Akatsuki. All's to say that Izuna was, by a fair margin, rich. In his left hand holds Kurama's final note to him, details about the jinchuuriki, and where and how they would be meeting.

Izuna doesn't question how he arranged this. He was here to do his part then dip. And after that...he'll be going to Konoha. *I'll see my clan again.* Izuna grimaces at the thought. He doesn't know if he'll be able to take it. *Will I see Naruto too? What about Sasuke? What about Itachi?* It's too much to think about. He shakes his head, curses the fire under his skin, the pattern of black ink that binds him in a fate he's starting to hate, and sets the paper on fire.

The jinchuuriki is late. He peeks his head out to squint at the sun, high and bright between a green canopy. There's a sense of deja vu hanging about this place, and Izuna wants to leave. Desperately.

He almost does, but then something catches his senses. And even him, who's not much of a sensor, can feel bijuu chakra now that he knows how to look for it. And it's not very subtle, either. He spots the girl before she sees him, and he quickly falls deeper into the shadows to wait.

It takes a while, but the jinchuuriki slowly makes her way over to him. She's being ignored by most of the civilians, but she's still cautious. Izuna can appreciate that, at least. She's also a tiny child, and Izuna's not looking forward to traveling with a tiny child. Once she's slipped between the two houses, Izuna puts up an illusion seal, one of Kurama's favorites, according to Naruto.

"Are you Fuu?" He asks first. He looks down at her.

"Depends," she says, "Are you Izuna Uchiha?"

"Hn."

"Oh!" Her demeanor instantly melts into cheerfulness. Izuna's eyebrow slowly inches upward. "Then yeah, I'm Fuu, nice to meet you." She holds out her hand. He stares at her blankly. "You're supposed to shake my hand," she says with all seriousness that a 10 year old can muster. *Okay, whatever.* Izuna shakes her hand.

Then he crouches down so he can talk to her properly, and he watches that flitting microexpression of shock that turns to pure joy. Something stabs at Izuna's heart, something a lot like hatred. But it's not towards any one person. Just the whole thing. All of it. The world. Because Naruto told him about this, how jinchuuriki are never looked at. How they're never seen unless it's with fear, how no one talks to them and no one acknowledges them unless it's to be used.

"Chomei told me about you," Fuu says. *Is she glittering?* Izuna thinks he sees an aura around her. It's not like Naruto's warm orange, but more like sparkly white and yellow. *We'll have to quell that before we run for it.* "Chomei heard it from Kurama, and Kurama told her to tell me that someone named Izuna Uchiha would be here, and Chomei told me to go with you."

"Well, that depends," Izuna says carefully. He tries to subtly bring down her anxious energy by controlling his own voice. "Do you *want* to go, or not?"

Fuu opens her mouth, then closes it. "Where...where would we be going, exactly?"

Izuna pulls his own mouth into a line. "Chomei told you about Kurama. Kurama is where I'd be taking you."

"Chomei says that's where I belong."

Izuna doesn't know what to say to that. He changes tactics. "Well...how do you feel about your village? Do you like it here? How do the people treat you?"

Fuu bristles at that. "They never let me leave. I want to go exploring but they say I can't, because it's dangerous. And they say Chomei is bad and that I shouldn't talk to her! They're scared of her. Chomei says that once I master my own chakra, I can master hers as well, but no one will train me!"

"They have a point, it is dangerous outside," Izuna says, "there are people who want to kill you because they want your power."

Fuu grimaces at him, and she takes a step back, “Chomei says Kurama will protect us. And the whole reason I’m a jinchuuriki in the first place is because my village wants Chomei’s power.”

Well said. “He will, he’d die for you,” Izuna confirms, and somehow, it’s true. He snorts, thinking about all the things he had learned about the malicious kyuubi, and how different he was now. “Chomei is his sibling, and you are her jinchuuriki. To him, you’re as good as family. He has other jinchuuriki with him too. So if you want to meet them….”

Fuu sucks in a quick breath, her eyes turn glassy for a second. *Fuck is she going to cry?* Izuna panics internally. But she gathers herself quickly and beams at him, “Then I have to go, for my family!”

It’s that simple huh? Izuna smiles down at the floor. *For family...* “But you have to understand that you’re leaving your village. Is there anyone you’ll miss?”

Fuu thinks for a long while, carefully, considering. Izuna can almost see the pages turning in her head, can see her comb through every person she’s ever met. Then she shakes her head, “No one that I’m willing to give this up for.”

Izuna scoffs, “You really know yourself huh?” He makes up his mind. “If at any point you change your mind, you have to tell me. And not Chomei, *you.* It’s *your* decision, and no one else’s, got that?” *Don’t make my mistake. Don’t leave behind a friend, don’t go chasing towards a hatred you can’t escape-*

Fuu nods vigorously, “Yes sir!” Izuna smiles quietly to himself. No. Fuu’s not like that, he can tell that she’s more like Naruto than he’ll ever be. *Some people are just* like that, *aren’t they.* He motions for her to follow, farther back into the alley. “Come with me, we need to disguise you so we can get you out of the village-”

“Oh, I know a way out,” Fuu cuts him off. Before he can blink, she rushes forward. She snags his hand to tug him along like she’s not half his height, and very much 10 years old. Izuna allows it as they weave between buildings, Izuna prepared for an attack at all sides. He spins his sharingan to life, a genjutsu at the ready. Just in case.

But true to Fuu’s words, she knows just the right paths to take to avoid any scouts or anbu, and soon they’re far into the outskirts of the village. They pause along the tree line, a vast portion of the lake stretching out endlessly in front of them. There is a narrow bridge that acts as the only way in and out through land. Most of it is obscured under a massive waterfall. That’s the way Izuna had comet through, but it wasn’t good terrain for fighting, all slippery rocks and the rumbling of water.

But Fuu ignores all of that and turns instead towards the overgrown section of the forest. Huge tumbles of boulders and moss covered rocks sit in between large oak tree trunks. There’s a thick curtain of lichen draped over a fallen log, and Fuu pulls it back to reveal a small den in the hollowed wood. She fits perfectly through the doorway, but Izuna has to crouch down to squeeze inside.

“Most people would stop here, wouldn’t they?” Fuu says, with a triumphant grin, “but that’s where they fail!” She presses her hands on the wood and a section falls away. A tunnel stretches far off underground, much wider and taller than the current hole they were sitting in. Or, Izuna was sitting, Fuu could stand up just fine.

“How many times have you run away?” Izuna mutters, spotting some personal artifacts in the corners of the den. Fuu snags a small backpack hidden behind a pile of sticks and leaves.

“Too many times,” She cackles wickedly, “This village is too small for me. Chomei says I’m meant to be flying-” her eyes glitter again, the way that kid’s eyes do when they talk of dreams and bigger things, “not hiding behind trees and walls and waterfalls.”

Fuu shuffles through the tunnel. “I normally don’t get very far, but it still takes a few days for them to catch me…” she spins on her heels and drags Izuna along. It was completely unnecessary, Izuna was right behind her. “But now you’re here. And you’re like, super strong right?”

“Relatively. Yes.” Izuna says.

“Chomei doesn’t like your chakra,” Fuu babbles as they walk deeper and deeper. The tunnel starts growing dark.

Izuna ducks his head to avoid a stalactite. Fuu walks right under it without a care in the world. “Bijuu naturally dislike Uchiha,” Izuna tells her, “We’re one of the clans that has the potential to control them.”

“Really?” Fuu gasps, then she goes quiet. She starts laughing suddenly. “Chomei is grumbling about this so much! If Kurama hadn’t vouched for you, she said she’d love to pierce right through your eyes and into your brain! And she never says that! She’s normally so nice.”

Izuna scoffs. “Of course.”

“If Bijuu hate Uchiha, then what about Kurama? Chomei keeps telling me he’s not a jinchuuriki, but the actual kyuubi. He’s a bijuu and he vouched for you, that’s gotta mean something, right?”

Izuna blinks down at her. She’s glowing faintly. That sparkly aura is definitely Chomei. He’s not sure how to answer her question. *We have history. We’re from the same time, we’re both trying to save the world. We’re...he’s…*

“It’s complicated,” Izuna ends up grumbling, much to Fuu’s disappointment. Though the mischievous look in her eyes tells she’s not letting it go. Izuna plows forward, getting uncomfortable talking about himself. “Also, I didn’t come here alone. Konoha’s been tracking my movements and sent...uh...they sent-” *An anbu? Some guy? My future sensei (but he doesn’t know that?)* “They sent someone to basically make sure I’m not a threat. Uchiha and all...kinda makes it their problem.”

“...So there’s someone from Konoha here? Are they friendly!?” Fuu jumps a little, “I can make more friends!”

Sure... He’ll doubt Kakashi will be very endeared by her in this current time of his life. “The point is. Don’t tell him you’re a jinchuuriki, it’ll lead to a lot of trouble,” Fuu tilts her head, questioning. Izuna tells it to her straight, “Look, anything that we say around Kakashi is going straight back to konoha, and if *he* finds out that you’re a jinchuuriki, he’ll back out immediately. He might try to take you back to Taki, or just go straight to Konoha and warn them about what I’m doing. Then we’ll both be screwed, got it? Because if I’m caught, then you’re caught.”

“Oh yeah no, that make’s *total* sense,” Fuu says, though she sounds a bit bummed out.

He sighs. “It’s a difficult situation.”

“It’s just...I thought that for once in my life I could just...be myself and it wouldn’t be a problem.”

Damn, that hurts. “Once I get you to Kurama, it *won’t* be a problem.”

“Right, right. Just don’t mention Chomei or jinchuuriki at all!”

“Yes, exactly, and don’t even say Kurama’s name.”

“But what if...what if Kurama needs to get a message to you through Chomei?”

Izuna shakes his head. “We use a fox to send messages. And if Chomei has something to say, then I can speak to her directly, but she’ll probably hate me for it.”

Fuu stops dead in her tracks, Izuna nearly tramples her. She spins on her heel and stares at him, disbelieving. “Are you serious? You can talk to Chomei? But I thought that only…”

Izuna taps under his eye. “Sharingan. I can get into your mindscape. It’s why the Bijuu hate us. Once we’re in, we can put the Bijuu under genjutsu directly.”

“Oh…” Fuu trails off. “That’s overpowered as hell!”

Izuna snorts at her, “says the walking chakra pool.”

“Hey!”

* * *

When The two finally make it to where Izuna had hidden Kakashi and his foxes away, he’s greeted by an interesting sight. Kakashi crouches on one end of the camp, with his backpack hugged the his front. He doesn’t have a weapon out, but his hand hovers precariously over

the kunai pouch on his hip. On the other side are all seven of Izuna's foxes, huddled in a big ball of fluff and tails. And pacing between them, stepping over coals and embers, is Karasu. His black tail waves flames into the air, his paws leave trails of soot as he bounds and leaps through the firepit. He has a scroll tucked between his teeth, a swirl decorating the out fabric. The tassel has a curious fox charm hanging off the end.

Izuna stops dead and holds Fuu back from rushing in, though she looks like she's about to explode from excitement. Her eyes latch onto the foxes lightning quick. Izuna doesn't even know if she sees Karasu's second tail.

When Kakashi spots him a beat later, he body flickers to his side, eyes glued to Karasu and his two tails. "You're not freaking out," he says. "There's a two tailed fox in the *fire* and you're not freaking out at all."

"No. I'm not."

Kakashi blinks several times. "Is this the person you *rescued?"*

Izuna shoves him. It's so incredibly childish that Kakashi actually sputters in disbelief.

Fuu bounds forward, shaking off Izuna's hand and stopping right in front of Kakashi, who all but backs away as if *she* were another two tailed fox. "Hi! I'm Fuu! Izuna says your name is Kakashi, it's nice to meet you!" While the two get acquainted, Izuna motions for Karasu. He comes along with the rest of them, and suddenly he's swamped in red and white fur. Aka gets too excited and leaps onto his chest with enough force to send him flat on his back.

"Okay, *okay* I get it, it's been like, a few hours tops!" Izuna hisses at them, "Just let me-" a paw is unceremoniously shoved into his cheek, "lets me have the damn scroll you traitor!" He snaps at Karasu. The reds break out into their dissonant laughter, but finally allow him to sit up right. He swipes the scroll from Karasu, who baps him with his paws several times before darting off into the trees. Izuna makes faces after him until he can't see a sliver of his twin tails.

The other foxes go back to lounging around or playing. Hokori and Kurome seem to have found friends in Yuki and Gin.

"What does your mysterious employer have to say this time?" Kakashi says. When Izuna looks up, his heart stops dead. Kakashi has Fuu on his shoulders. The girl is beaming brightly. She's laughing. Izuna feels he's seen this before. Just a different kid, in a different time. But that smile looks so familiar it aches, and Kakashi's just the same.

"Have you ever thought about a genin team?" He blurts out so suddenly. Izuna snaps his mouth shut when he realizes what he said. Kakashi's one eye goes through several different emotions at once, but it lands in that lazy arrogant upturn that was *oh so familiar.*

"Kids aren't really *my thing,"* Kakashi says.

Izuna lifts a brow. "Sure, Kakashi…" he smiles down at the scroll. It must be carrying bad news if Kurama puts so much care into it. "Just like foxes aren't mine, right?"

Chapter End Notes

I'm so excited for the next chapter!! I actually wrote it as chapter 7 but then I kept changing things and pushing it back aha

Face of a Stranger

Chapter Notes

Plot plot Plot Plot PLot PLOt PlOt pLOT PLOT PLOT

I crave validation from the internet, so I'm uploading this earlier than I probably should

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Drop the charges, all of them. Our mystery murderer did us a favor, and we didn’t even know it,” Fugaku slams a fist down on the table. It rattles with the force. Shikaku Nara looks mildly inconvenienced. Inoichi Yamanaka sighs into the palm of his hand. Itachi has his eyes closed, trying to completely dissolve into the wall, by the looks of it. In the opposite corner was Shibi Aburame, also a silent statue.

“We need to know if Danzo was their only target.” Hiashi Hyuuga reasons. “Until then, we can’t ‘drop’ anything.”

Fugaku glares sullenly at the Hyuuga head. “You, of all people, should be willing to compromise in this situation.”

“I think we’re forgetting a good detail; we’ve got no leads on a culprit either way,” Iniochi butts in. “Maybe if we had something—save for that damn blond hair that put *me* into suspicion—” he sends a pointed look at Itachi, who actively presses against the stone walls, “then *maybe* this would have more relevance. It’s been two months and we have nothing!”

“Konoha’s best trackers can’t pinpoint this shinobi. They’re clearly good at stealth, to say the least,” Shikaku mutters.

“At least?” Inoichi hisses. “This shinobi got through our barrier effortlessly, which is something no one has *ever* done. The seals were made by Uzushio-nin before the fall. Those seals are as old as time, and stronger than the city itself.”

“Stop fangirling,” Shikaku accuses.

“I am *not-”*

“The easiest and most logical conclusion to how they slipped the barrier is that the ninja who killed Danzo was from Konoha,” Shikaku steamrolls right over his friend. It’s always been known that was the leading theory. It left a bitter taste in everyone’s mouth, and a heavy silence in the air. No one liked to think of that possibility. “They could be here. In the village still. Maybe even in this room.”

Eyes drift. It's natural. Itachi hates how many seem to land on him. He's not wearing a mask, but he puts one on all the same, and carefully, quietly, looks at a blank piece of scroll rolled out on the table. His father takes it as a personal offence. Of course he did. "You think Itachi…?" He whispers, so quiet it's more like a breath than anything. His fury is clear in the calm.

"We don't suspect anyone," Inoichi smooths over immediately, "we're hoping for more information. Itachi was on the tracking team when the murder first happened, with Shisui and Kakashi."

"He's already told us everything there is to know," Fugaku turns to Itachi. His eyes were frighteningly cold, chips of coal in the winter, frigid when they land on Itachi scrutinizingly. They weren't the eyes of his father, but the eyes of a clan head and chief of police.

Itachi doesn't hesitate, per se, but he moves slow and cautious as he takes his place by his father's side. The clan heads all look at him with those accusing eyes again, much more fire than ice. He takes a deep breath. "There's nothing else to report. Like Inoichi said, there was only the one blond hair. Nothing more. No chakra traces, no smell, no footprints or weapons left behind. It's like a ghost did it."

"A ghost with blond hair," Shikaku scoffs.

"Something like that," Itachi mutters.

On the other side of the table, Hiashi drops his head in disappointment. "This isn't something we should be joking about so casually."

Fugaku produces a file, one that was released on that day. Danzo's file. "What I think we should *really* be focusing on are these," He tosses the envelope to the center. Shikaku easily swipes it and starts arranging all the documents. "The hokage signed some of these. Some he didn't. I want to know if he still has our best interests in mind, if he was truly unaware that Danzo was slipping ROOT and warmongering right under his old nose, or if he's been...conspiring."

Itachi picks up on their uneasiness. It radiates off each and every one of them. Shikaku exhales heavily, like a ton of bricks. The Akimichi head grumbles under his breath. Inoichi looks cross. The Inuzuka ninken sleeping in the corner prick up their ears at the change of aura.

"You're dipping into dangerous territory, Fugaku," Shikaku warns, "frankly, I want nothing to do with it...Personally, I believe that the murderer had only this target in mind, and no others, and that in all, they brought light to the rot under Konoha when no one, not even the Hokage, could. And because Danzo is now dead, and his crimes exposed, no further actions should be taken, both against the Hokage, or the murderer."

"If we ever come across them, which I very much doubt, then we'll have to pick their brain to get any real answers," Inoichi says. Itachi doesn't like the thought of anyone picking brains, which was ironic, considering his taste for genjutsu.

"If..." Shikaku summarizes. He lets it hang in the air. *If.* Itachi, who's been hunting and tracking since he was seven, knows a hopeless situation when he sees one. This was one of them, perhaps the most hopeless he's ever come across. Even Kakashi had been completely and utterly stumped, and it was *Kakashi.* Whoever had done it, had done it well.

Before another word can be said, the door creaks open with a knock on the wall. Shisui body flickers past them all, landing next to Itachi with a bump of their shoulders. "What I'd miss?" He says a bit too cheerfully. He's still in his anbu gear with his cat mask nestled sideways in his hair. He grins wicked yet innocent at the same time.

"Shisui, we're in the middle of a meeting," Fugaku says with a bit of ice around the edges.

Shisui bows quickly to Itachi's father. "Sorry sir, Itachi has the next watch. He's already late."

Itachi internally panics, but doesn't react. He looks at his father expectantly. Fugaku sighs his heavy, disappointing sigh, then waves them out. Itachi escapes quickly, almost too quickly. Shisui catches him before he can vault off a roof once they've left the building.

"I can't believe the Hokage still lets us on guard duty, even with this whole fiasco," Shisui says. "I mean, Uchiha are the prime suspects and all."

Itachi shakes his head. "You know why."

"Yeah…"

They make a quick detour to the Anbu headquarters for Itachi's stuff. Shisui unbuckles his armor plates while Itachi puts his on. "Have you seen Kakashi anywhere, by the way? It's like he just… vanished." Shisui mutters.

Itachi raises a shoulder. "He probably just had a mission."

"Without *us?* We're his team and he didn't even say goodbye?"

Itachi stares at him for a long, silent second. "You know as well I do that we don't get the chance more often than not."

Shisui rolls his eyes and slams his head back against the lockers, making them rattle. "I *know* I'm just complaining…"

"You complain about everything."

"I hate guard duty, " Shisui whines as if he's proving Itachi's point. "I'm always in a shit mood afterwards."

"Well...what are you gonna do about it?" Itachi hisses back.

Shisui glances around, as if there were anbu hidden behind the low couch and lazy spinning ceiling fan. Hell, there might be. "If it were up to me, I'd make sure he had someone to rely on, at least."

“Would you do it?” Itachi asks, cautious.

Shisui doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. In a heartbeat. That kid’s the most lonely person I’ve ever seen —he’s still at the academy, by the way. But the way that Konoha treats him, I can’t believe he hasn’t tried to run away yet.”

Itachi lifts a shoulder. He slips a tanto blade onto his back, then pulls his crow mask over his face. “Maybe he has, and we just don’t know,” Itachi grins, now that he’s behind the mask. Shisui sees it anyway. “He’s surprisingly easy to lose sight of, even with a sharingan.”

“He’s good at pranks, is all. He tricks the chunin all the time. If someone actually *taught* him something, he could be…” Shisui shrugs then, and stops. But Itachi gets it. *He could be a genius...Someone should do something about that...*

Itachi jumps up onto the sill and waves goodbye to Shisui. He leaps down easily and makes a beeline for the academy. Itachi doesn’t mind watching Naruto every now and then. The kid has had an anbu trail since his birth. Him and Shisui were put on his guard whenever they were in the village, sharingan eyes and all. Shisui was right though, Naruto was a pretty lonely kid. Like now, when the academy let out for the day and all the kids gathered in the front lawn to be picked up by their parents, Naruto would sit on the swing and watch.

Itachi sits on a roof and observes as Naruto swings listlessly, his small hands clasp impossibly tight on the cord ropes. Itachi squints at the boy. He looks...more agitated than usual, almost angry. He’s never seen Naruto angry before. Itachi doesn’t *want* to see a small seven year old angry. Kids like him and Sasuke shouldn’t *be* angry like that. His attention drifts a bit after he checks the perimeter. He spies Sasuke trailing sullenly out the doors, kicking up the small weeds that grow on the sides of the path. Itachi’s mouth quirks up in a quick smile at the sight of his petulant and stubborn little brother. Sasuke doesn’t stop moving, even when a couple of girls try to get his attention. Itachi sighs. Okay, maybe Sasuke was a bit more socially awkward than even *him.* Which was saying something, according to Shisui.

Itachi wants nothing more than to swoop down and scare the life out of his brother. He bet Sasuke would pull that face he does when he gets annoyed, with his cheeks puffed out and his brows pointed down. Itachi laughs just thinking about it. He can’t though, and that aches more than it should. He’ll see his brother later that night, but probably won’t get to spend much time, given his hectic schedule. With the death of Danzo, there was a constant perimeter around the village. The Hokage said it would be there for only a few more days, then they’d give it up.

He catches a flicker of blond in the corner of his eye and turns his attention back to Naruto, who starts to sit up from his spot on the swing. The sun is almost setting. It’d soon get swallowed up by the hokage mountain. Itachi watches carefully as Naruto stretches out his arms, then starts off at an agitated pace. It catches his attention immediately. *Something’s bothering him…* He knows how Naruto walks. With a curl to his back and his head down, at a slow and invisible pace. But this...this was restlessness in his bones, like he had to move or he’d die. Naruto, only seven years old, with the nerves of someone twice his age. Itachi watches as the kid dodges people and shadows like both are equally poisonous. He skirts through crowds like he’s made of nothing, air parting through tree branches. There’s an air of

hush whispers around him, fleeting glances, the slight pull of clothes and children's hands, the turn of shoulders to face his back.

That is until it's none of that. Naruto stops suddenly, enough so that Itachi nearly misses him.

Itachi immediately calls a crow to him. He waits, a feeling of dread crawling into his throat the longer the scene below him unfolds.

The stranger Naruto stops in front of has bright, blood red hair that falls around him in a mane. Itachi couldn't see any hitai-ate, nor any weapons, which was only a small relief. The man was dressed in a red haori with orange waves. On his back was a big yellow sun with a red spiral. He's never seen this man before. Not in Konoha, nor outside it. There's something vaguely familiar and distinctive about him though. It makes Itachi's skin itch. He activates his sharingan, and waits with bated breath.

"I know you…" Naruto is saying.

One shoulder lifts casually. The stranger barks something like a rough imitation of a laugh. He sounds...broken. "You could say that, kit."

"No! I know I've never *seen* you...but-"

"-but you've sensed me, haven't you," The stranger crouches. He doesn't touch Naruto at all. In fact he keeps a good two feet of distance between them. Itachi would probably draw the line there. The man stares at Naruto with somber red eyes. "I'm here now. I'm here for your answer. You remember right? The question? He talked to you right?" The stranger sounds choked up, like he's holding back tears.

Naruto nods easily, excitedly. His blue eyes shine more than Itachi's ever seen them. And he realises, with a sinking in his stomach, that the stranger was offering something, something that Naruto will inevitably want. Because this man stood at his eye level, and smiled at him, and *spoke* to him when no one else did. *We've all been fools. Someone should have done something sooner-*

"I do! I remember!" Naruto tilts on the balls of his feet, then he reaches his hands out hesitantly. The stranger also hesitates, then offers his palms to Naruto. Their hands bridge the gap of distance between them, and clasp together easily. Naruto smiles wide, bright as the sun. The stranger laughs, broken and sad. Itachi can feel the grief from up on his roof.

"You really are like me, aren't you?" Naruto asks.

The stranger chuckles. "In more ways than you'll ever know."

He shouldn't let this go on for longer, but he needs information. He wants to know who the red man is. Naruto's smile turns into a frown. "I...I don't belong here, do I?"

The stranger pulls his brows into an angry scowl. "Konoha can be a foolish place. It hurt you, and abandoned you, and it thinks it deserves your loyalty, your *life,* " he says, "But I can't make your decisions for you. It's *your* choice, not mine, do you understand?"

“Yes…” Naruto grips the man’s hands tighter. Itachi sees something glinting like silver where his nails should be. *Claws?*

“I can’t stay in Konoha, kit,” The man whispers, “But know that there is a place for you outside of this village, a place that tugs at you. And that’s where I’ll be, along with the rest of us.”

Naruto straightens up, and Itachi knows that look in his eyes all too well. It’s in Sasuke’s more often than not. That want of approval, the desire for *more.* Itachi sends his crow to the Hokage tower.

“Then I want to go there, with you!”

The man chuckles lightly, then sighs. He reaches up slowly and drops a hand on Naruto’s head. “Your Anbu friend won’t be happy about that.” Chills. Itachi rarely gets them, but they’re there now. He feels the air thicken with something he hasn’t felt in seven years, and it’s fear that courses through him like fire. The chakra tastes like acid in the back of his throat. *He’s a jinchuuriki!*

Itachi leaps forward regardless, sharingan spinning, but the man snatches Naruto before he hits the ground and pointedly avoids his eyes. Itachi flashes his tanto blade, swirling wires around them as he goes. The blade connects with claws, one of his wires cuts into the man’s wrist while he jumps over the other.

He sends fire down the line. All the man does is growl, loops his hand into it, and *pulls.* Itachi lets go before he’s sent flying, then body flickers back to avoid the swipe of claws. There’s no counterattack though. The man scoops up Naruto, and the kid easily clings to his front.

Itachi bars their path. “Stop, or I’ll be forced to kill you!” Itachi hisses. “Drop Naruto now!”

“Not a chance, Uchiha brat!” The man barks. Naruto stares at him wide eyed. Itachi leaps at them. He’s greeted with another vicious swipe of razor sharp claws, then the man jumps straight at him. It catches him off guard, and they collide. Itachi hisses in pain when he finds the man’s skin burns as hot as coals.

“Out of my way!” The man snarls, “Naruto doesn’t belong to you!”

“He belongs to this village,” Itachi hisses. Naruto buries his face into the man’s collar, who bares his fang-like teeth. Itachi spots his crow coming back and internally rejoices. Reinforcements. About damn time.

The man also notices, lightning fast. *Oh shit*- Itachi doesn’t know what he sees, besides a sphere of a void growing in the palm of the man’s hand, and he knows, instinctively, as the world around it warps and shifts, that he *does not* want to be hit with that. Itachi dodges, barely, as the orb whizzes past his mask. He tracks it with his sharingan, sees the tight spirals of chakra that wrap infinitely inward until they become nothing but a dense *material.* It explodes into the side of the building, and ruptures the entire thing into dust. The shock wave that follows throws him flat onto his face.

Fuck.

When he pulls his head out of the asphalt, the red man and Naruto are already bounding down the street. His vision swims. *That's not good.* Itachi rises to his feet anyway. When he stands, there's an intense ringing in his ears. He gives his head a shake before he starts forward.

There's a streak of black and blue at his side, and whirls past, faster than he's ever seen him. He moves in a blur, a swirl of fire and leaves. When Shisui gets close enough, the stranger growls something inhuman.

Itachi's sharingan catches every movement that happens after that. The man takes one look over his shoulder at Shisui flying at him at the speed of light. There's a wave of brilliant red chakra in the encroaching darkness, and his claws whirl. Shisui's wrist is caught like he's nothing but a misbehaving child, and he's thrown aside, paper in the wind.

"What was that?" Shisui whispers when he lands in a heap of limbs next to Itachi. "That felt like-"

"No time," Itachi warns. He pulls his wires again. If it were just the red man, he'd be using more fire jutsu, but with Naruto clinging to him like a monkey, he doesn't dare use anything with a big impact radius. Taijutsu would be best, if the man didn't have knives for fingernails, and inhuman reflexes. And Itachi doesn't think he'll survive another hit to his head, not from the stranger.

"He's used to fighting against sharingan, apparently," Shisui mutters darkly. He pulls out a long line of kunai.

There's an anxious wave swelling in his chest, and once it crests he won't be able to stop the self loathing, the hate. If things go bad it's *his fault,* because he had hesitated, because he'd been too careless, too *curious.*

A couple other anbu squads are there too, darting along the roofs in a series of body flickers, but Itachi knows that it's too late. The man crouches at the edge of the village, then leaps straight up the wall, leaving nothing, not even a trace of hair or foot print behind.

Shisui swears loudly beside him. "How the hell did everything go to shit this quickly? First Danzo and now this!"

Itachi can't respond, currently trying to kill the panic taking hold of his lungs. "This is my fault," He chokes out. "This is my fault. I shouldn't have let him get that close. I should've stopped him. I could have stopped him-"

If it was Sasuke, would I have let the man get closer? Would Shisui? Or Kakashi? Or any other Anbu? Was it just me, and my mistake?

The Hokage gets there seconds later, a storm flickering across his deep cut features. Itachi has never seen him this angry before. He goes to one knee immediately. "What did he look like, Crow?"

“Red hair, red eyes. He wore a red and orange Haori with wave patterns, a spiral sun on the back. And he looked like…” He hesitates, thinking. *He was a stranger, but he seemed so… familiar, just as Naruto has said.* And then it hits him like he’s been slammed into the asphalt again.

“What is it?” The Hokage mutters.

He remembers a woman. His mother’s friend. He remembers red hair, and round eyes. And he remembers the way the two laughed, and baby Sasuke in his mother’s arms, and the woman expecting a child of her own. And he remembers the funeral, and her picture on the grave, and yellow hair and blue eyes and red-

“Hokage-sama-” His voice shakes, he’s biting back tears and he doesn’t know why. “He looks like Kushina Uzumaki.”

There’s a ripple among the watching anbu. Shisui takes a second, then puts his face into a hand, shaking his head ever so slowly. The Hokage himself doesn’t try to hide the surprise, nor the darkness that clouds him the next heartbeat. Itachi takes it in, along with a sharp inhale that tastes of metal and salt. Blood and tears.

“Crow, Cat, take fox and bird and track them. I’ll be contacting Jiraiya—it's about time he takes responsibility. Use your crows to keep in touch with him on further notice.”

“Hokage-sama, where is Wolf? He’s our Anbu captain, shouldn’t he be coming with-” Shisui starts. He’s cut off by a scalding glare.

The Hokage sighs wearily. “No, he’s still on a solo mission right now. Cat, you will be the leader for this mission.”

Shisui straightens, then bows low. “Yes sir.”

“Now hurry, before he gets too far.”

~Some Art~

Chapter End Notes

I have just been SITTING on that Itachi fanart for like a month and a half now, and I finally get to include it!

This is very funny to me, but basically I keep the whole fic on a google doc, but on there my word count is almost 60k, while its current status here is around 40k. I've written entire chapters and scenes and arcs that I've just absolutely scrapped but I'm too sentimental to get rid of T^T

aND THEN there's a whole other fic that I wrote before this one that's 30k. And THAT fic is basically the first draft of this one, only everything besides the main premise is different lol. (Its basically if Sasuke and Kurama traveled together instead of running off in different directions at the start)

And Imma be real, this never-before-seen unpublished first draft is waaay more funny than this lmaoo. Can you imagine the banter?? The insults?? The absolute horror of traveling with one Sasuke Uchiha and Kurama?? Together in the same place for more than five minutes?? Oh the humanity. Too bad I accidentally destroyed the plot and got too stumped to continue. And then I wrote this emotional garbage so whoops.

Collision Course

Chapter Notes

T/W: Some fighting and blood and such, kinda gross ngl

So this chapter is a beefy one, but honestly...its my favorite chapter I've written so far!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It starts off horribly, painfully, familiar. The mist rolls in through the east, thickening, swamping, humming with strange chakra. Izuna and Kakashi pick it up at the same time, that deadly bloodlust that could freeze a lesser shinobi. Or, if you're Fuu, who steamrolls through the forested paths with her arms swinging and a skip in her step. His foxes have all but scattered to go find the sun. Even Kurome and Hokori abandoned their spots in his cloak to trot off with the rest of them. He's silently grateful that they won't be in harm's way when the fighting starts. Izuna makes no move to react, though the deja vu crashes down on him and he's just twelve again. Just in Wave Country again. He sees that glint of steel and bandaged face and short cut brown hair and red clouds—wait a minute.

Izuna whips around just as Kubikiribocho cleaves the ground where he just was. He bites his tongue to keep his jaw from hitting the floor. Kakashi moves like lightning, he snatches Fuu up and leaps into the trees. Izuna draws his sword and turns in a quick circle. His attacker has vanished again into his mist. Izuna spins his sharingan to life, he cuts through the thick clouds with his sword, then clicks his tongue when it proves futile.

But it *was* Kubikiribocho. He remembers that sword well. He remembers it nearly taking off his head, nearly slicing through Kakashi. It all comes back to him, pulling him back into the past. He could be twelve again, and his legs nearly shake, and his heart begins to race. He clocks Fuu's and Kakashi's positions, they're not far away, Kakashi has her pressed to the trunk of a tree while he guards her front, he's also at a better vantage than Izuna himself, and ready to make a call out if their attackers shows himself again.

"What's going on?" He hears Fuu whisper.

Kakashi motions for her to stay quiet. She looks to Izuna first and he nods. Only then does she seem complacent to sit still.

A tense minute passes in silence. The only movement of the slow rolling mist. Izuna starts getting annoyed. "Come out you fucking pest!" He shouts. Quieter, to himself, to the Sasuke that's buried under all these lies, he whispers, "C'mon, Zabuza, you're not a coward…"

Logically speaking, Zabuza shouldn't be anywhere near here. He's not in Steam Country, and he sure as hell isn't Akatsuki. And even though he looks between the mist filled trees for that slit-eyed mask and icy presence, he knows that Haku can't be more than 12 years old. But Kubikiribocho was Zabuza's. Once. It was his, and even when Suigetsu took it from his grave Izuna never thought of that blade as anyone else's.

But Izuna's not twelve anymore. He's not Sasuke anymore. Just another imitation, a different echo in a different time. Just like this person. And this person was Akatsuki. He was going to die.

Izuna flashes through his hand signs and produces a fire ball so large that it scorches away the clouds. The mist burns up along with it and he finally gets a glimpse of his attacker. The man holds Kubikiribocho just like Zabuza, over his shoulder in a low crouch. But Izuna's faster than he can react. He spirals towards him in a deadly flash of his katana. Kubikiribocho comes down deceptively fast. Their blades clash and lock. Izuna pushes, and this not-Zabuza does the same. Izuna looks at him and wrinkles his nose. He's from Kiri, slashed Hitai-ate and all.

The man grins. Shark teeth. There's a huge scar on the right side of his face. "No genjutsu? I thought all you Uchiha are mind melting freaks."

"I don't need it for the likes of you," Izuna snaps back. They circle, still locked together at the hilts on their weapons. Izuna's worried his katana will snap. He charges his lightning through it, and the blade comes alive. It starts to eat through Kubikiribocho. The man pulls back before Izuna can do any real damage.

"What's your name?" Izuna asks, because he doesn't know and it bothers him. He's never seen this man, and Naruto never told him. Naruto told him *every* Akatsuki member that he met. But that sword is supposed to be Zabuza's. Which meant—"You died before Zabuza went rogue…" He says outloud, almost dumbfounded by this small revelation.

The man sneers at him. "There it is, that weird mind shit!" He swings Kubikiribocho in a wide arc so Izuna can't get close. "I'm not here for you!"

"I know," Izuna mutters. "Tell me your name, I don't know it."

"Well that's too damn bad." The man leaps at him again. Izuna jumps over his swing and strikes lightning down with his katana. He dodges just barely, some of the static clings to his black and red cloak.

"Amateseru," he calls forth his black flames, and they burst into life on that wretched Akatsuki cloak. It burns to a crisp as the man escapes from the fire. He glares at the ashes, at the still flickering dark flames, and grimaces. "They don't stop burning," Izuna tells him easily. "I'm stronger than you, did you realize?"

The man doesn't hesitate to rush him again. Izuna ducks and aims a good blow, slicing right through him. He bursts into water. *A clone! How stupid am I?*

Izuna whips around as Kakashi deflects Kubikiribocho with just a kunai. Just as he'd done in Wave, like he'll always do. Fuu is trapped between Kakashi and the tree, while the Akatsuki member bores down on them, looming, only Kakashi's kunai stopping him from cutting right through their heads. Izuna bolts forward, he dodges another clone, even as it swings at him. It cuts through the back of his leg, but he barely feels it. In a blink of an eye he's there. He tackles him sideways, a foot on his chest and another on his neck.

Izuna doesn't stall this time, there's too much at stake, and he'd forgotten that.

"Fuu look away!" He shouts just as they land, and he drives his katana straight through the man's left eye, out through the back of his skull and burying itself into the soft forest floor. There's a wet squelch and his body convulses for only a second. It's so fast he doesn't have time to scream. Kubikiribocho falls next to them with a loud thunk. The rest of the mist evaporates. Izuna crouches over the dead man, staring at his mangled face, cursing himself for being careless, for wanting selfish things like *names*.

He pulls his katana free. *Who were you?* He's not used to fighting nameless people. Even Deidara had shouted his. He'd known who he'd killed then, reluctantly. Sasuke wouldn't have cared. Izuna does.

"To be nameless is a terrible thing."

"It's safe now," Izuna calls them down over his shoulder. He spots Fuu up in the tree with her hands over her ears, and her eyes squeezed tight. Kakashi body flickers down to crouch next to him. He slowly turns the man's face to the recognizable side. "Do you know who he is?" Izuna asks.

Kakashi narrows his eye. "He looks familiar," Izuna snorts. *Tell me about it.* "He's probably listed in the Bingo Book. Kiri always seems to produce their fair share of missing nin."

Izuna nods slowly while he wipes his blade off on the man's shirt. He spots Kubikiribocho lying in the grass, looking peaceful. There was a thin splash of blood doting the metal. When he goes to stand, a blooming pain rockets up his right leg and he stumbles. Kakashi makes a move like he's going to catch him, but Izuna growls at him like a feral animal. He might as well be, at this point.

"Don't—" Izuna starts when Kakashi tries to say something, "Don't spew something sentimental or I might stab another eye today."

Kakashi gives him a flat look. "You're wounded. Like an idiot. So sit back down and at least wrap it."

Izuna clenches his jaw in annoyance, but he does sit down in the end. He takes a look at the wound after rolling up his pant leg, and grimaces at how severe the cut actually is. It's long and deep and oozing blood. Kubikiribocho had sliced a huge diagonal slash down his calf, nearly from the back of his knee to his ankle. Kakashi drops his backpack in front of him and starts digging through it.

“I got this,” Izuna hisses, He “Just… go grab Fuu and make sure she’s not traumatized or something. I want to know if she saw what I did.”

“You’re going to bleed to death if you don’t stop that now.” Kakashi reaches for him again, and all Izuna sees are different hands. Glowing hands. Warm hands that slam the breath out his lungs and pour golden chakra to replace the flesh and blood he’d lost. And he sees blue eyes and red eyes and bright white lights and—” *I’ll see you on the other side.”*

“Just go!” Izuna yells. “I don’t need your help!” He regrets it half a second later when Kakashi stands abruptly, grey eye cold and distant, and he flickers into the trees without so much as a snarky insult. Izuna shakes out his dirty hair like he’s trying to physically dislodge those horrible memories. They cling. Cobwebs on the insides of his eyes.

He digs through Kakashi’s supplies until he finds rolls of bandages and finally, *finally,* starts tying up his leg. Wrapping it won’t cut it in the long run, he’ll need stitches. But that can wait. What he really needs to do is seal the akatsuki’s body. While he works, his foxes slowly start creeping back into his peripherals. He gets to Gin before she can munch on the dead man’s head. Kurome and Hokori ride on Aka’s back while she prances through the undergrowth. When Yuki comes close and smells his bloodied leg, he whines and flattens his ears. Then he curls up beside his thigh and stays there until Izuna’s finished making his new seal.

He leans back from his work and gives Yuki a scratch behind the ears. The fox preens, with a blissful smile on his snout that instantly has the rest of them jealous and nipping at his hands.

“Are you done sulking?” Kakashi says behind him. “Fuu wants to talk to you, but you’re acting all brooding and unresponsive,” Kakashi chuckles to himself, “huh, you really *are* an Uchiha.”

“I’m done sulking,” Izuna admits. “I...I’m…” The words stick in his throat. He can’t look Kakashi in the eye. “I’m sorry I snapped.”

“Maa, that’s the first time you’ve apologized since we met,” Kakashi smiles, genuinely. Izuna sighs, relieved and exhausted.

He spots Fuu drumming her finger together in a nervous habit, looking sullen. “What did you want to talk about, Fuu?” Izuna asks. She comes forward.

“He was after me,” She mutters, “You warned me I know, but I…I didn’t think…”

“It’s hard to believe unless you see it,” Izuna reasons, “Do you...want to turn back?”

“No!” Fuu’s eyes shown gold in the encroaching darkness. *“Never!* I have people waiting for me, waiting for the both of us!”

Izuna stared at her. “You really are unbreakable, aren’t you.”

Fuu grins, wicked and fierce as any ten year old should grin, “You know it, and I have you. You’re incredible! I saw how you ran and jumped and you cut with lightning! That’s insane!

And Kakashi-" She turns her attention to him, and Kakashi takes a careful step back like she might jump on him. "-you blocked that huge sword with just a kunai! You have to teach me!"

"Whhhat?" Kakashi laughs nervously, "I don't think so-"

"Please?" Fuu clasps her hands together and all but begs, "Just one thing. I need to learn so I can defend myself. I'm tired of relying on other people and Cho-"

"Fuu," Izuna cuts her off before she says too much, "I'll show you something," Kakashi definitely caught onto that slip up. "But later. For now we should make camp and set up a perimeter. I'll do the seals. Fuu, stay around here, Aka can keep you company."

"I can do the traps," Kakashi says, "I saw that wound, you shouldn't be moving around until you stitch it."

Izuna clicks his tongue, annoyed, but Kakashi is right. "My seals are stronger," he says pettily anyway, "anything less and we might get found out."

"Then show me them," Kakashi hops closer and taps his Hitai-ate. Rather, the sharingan underneath. "I learn quick."

Izuna pulls a face. *Kurama would kill me...But what would Naruto do? What would he say, in that moment, if he was here? What the hell am I thinking, of course he'd show Kakashi. It's Kakashi.*

"Absolutely not." If Kakashi learns these, then he can learn to break them. And he's not on the side of the Jincuuriki, whose new home is made up of nothing but seals. *They're not for me to share.* Kakashi's hair seems to droop as he deflates.

"Well, you're not moving. Stitch up your wound." He turns to Fuu and ruffles her hair until it's a bird's nest, much to her complaint. "And Fuu can get firewood."

Fuu looks at Izuna. "As long as you stay in my sight."

"That won't be hard," Fuu says. She all but flutters off into the forest. He has to activate his sharingan to keep track of her but it gets tiring all too quickly. Instead, he pats Yuki awake. "If you keep track of Fuu, I'll give you Kakashi's extra rations," Izuna whispers to him, and the fox zooms after her.

Kakashi looks at him crossly. "I heard that."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Fuu comes back before Kakashi, just as Izuna is putting the last stitches through his leg. She makes a face and fake gags. "You should have seen the other guy," Izuna says as he wraps up the wound again. He rotates his foot around to make sure nothing is too tight. Fuu comes

over and carefully plops her bundle of tinder next to him. She sits down in the glass, then she slowly reaches her hands out towards his leg.

“What are you doing?” Izuna eyes her warily. Learning from his previous mistakes, he doesn’t snap at her like he did with Kakashi.

Fuu’s brow pinches together, a frown pulls at her mouth. “Chomei says that jinchuuriki can learn to heal their teammates, that I can give some of her chakra to you.”

Izuna studies her for a moment, watches as she zeroes in on his wound, as her fingers flex, but they hover there. And maybe he holds his breath for a second, wondering if she’ll be able to do it, if Chomei’s sparkly yellow-white chakra will come forth. But it doesn’t. “That takes a lot of time, you need to learn to control your own chakra before even considering manipulating Chomei’s.” Izuna supplies when Fuu puts her hands down, disappointed.

“Besides, I doubt Chomei would be very happy about her chakra being wasted on an Uchiha.”

Fuu giggles at that. “She says she’ll allow it because you saved us.”

“Hn,” He spots Kakashi high up in the branches and cuts their conversation short. Instead, he focuses on directing Fuu into making a fire pit. He lights it with a small fireball, and Fuu starts begging him to teach her. He’s certain that Fuu’s element is not fire, but regardless, he ends up going through the hand signs again.

“That’s one of the Uchiha’s clan jutsus,” Kakashi tells her, “can’t believe he’s sharing secrets.”

Izuna shrugs. He...doesn’t know how he feels about his clan anymore. He doesn’t really know how he feels about anything.

While Fuu practices, Izuna shoos his foxes away for them to go hunting. Only Mini and Tama leave, while the rest start swarming around Fuu. He digs into his own supply scrolls for food. Kakashi stares at him from across the smoke and ash.

“What?”

“You really just taught Fuu that jutsu,” Kakashi says, like he can’t believe it.

Izuna peers over his shoulder at Fuu furiously going through hand signs and exhaling huge lungfuls of air. His foxes chatter around her and laugh when she fails.

“I did,” Izuna turns back and pokes the fire. “She’ll figure it out eventually.”

“You’re not concerned with sharing clan techniques, even though she’s not remotely Uchiha…” Kakashi says. It’s not a question. More like, disbelief, astonishing disbelief that Izuna could be anything but a cold bastard with a prestigious name. “They won’t even teach me any sharingan techniques, I have to learn it all on my own or find archives of it in the library.”

“Yeah, they would do that…” He remembers vividly the first time he realized Kakashi had a sharingan. He remembers how pissed off he was at the situation. Izuna squints into the fire. “I used to believe in all that. Now, not so much. What I do know is that what’s mine, is mine to share freely.”

“Well, being separated from the bulk of your clan must do that to you.”

Surprisingly, it did not, not for a long, long time. Izuna doesn’t correct him. It would be too much. Instead, he looks off to the side to avoid catching Kakashi’s eye, and spots Kubikiribocho. The blade still has a bit of his blood splattered across it, and the knick he’d put in the metal was fully healed. He reaches over and pulls the sword to him. For him, this blade marked a turning point in his history. His first real mission. His first time outside the village. His first fight. And the reawakening of his sharingan. The chances of it happening again were slim.

“I’ll cut you a deal, Kakashi,” Izuna says. Kakashi makes an inquiring sound. “This sword and that missing nin both come from Kiri-”

Kakashi holds up his hand, “I see where this is going. We have to make a pit stop to Kiri after meeting up with that mysterious person who’s going to take Fuu, right?”

“Hn.” Izuna frowns down at Kubikiribocho. He cleans some of his blood off the blade.

“So then what's this deal we’re making? Because the previous one was that we’d go directly to Konoha, but that apparently got shot out the window.”

“I’ll teach you how to properly use the sharingan.”

‘Ok, deal,” Kakashi says immediately. No hesitation. Izuna almost smirks at the irony of it all. Somehow, it feels like a good goal to reach. When all the crazy dies down, he can go back to Konoha and train with his once sensei. “It’s not like you’re going to be ‘rescuing’ kids in Kiri and causing possible wars,” Kakashi pauses, “right?”

And suddenly Izuna does not feel like laughing anymore. Kakashi’s eyebrow slowly, slowly creeps up under his Hitai-ate. *“Right?”*

“You see, here’s the thing,” Izuna starts, “It’s not a kid this time...well, I actually don’t know how old he is currently, but he does need saving.”

Kakashi makes a noise like he’s about to object but Izuna beats him to it. “Okay before you freak out, you gotta listen. I’m serious about this one. It’s not like Fuu in that it’s a personal matter, this is like… Game changing, world ending type shit,” He takes a breath, trying to organize a sudden flurry of thoughts. “That scroll I received from the two tailed fox...it had news about the situation in Kiri.”

“Which is…?”

“Bad, to say the least.”

“Well, it’s always kind of been bad.”

Izuna snorts, “Yeah, no kidding. But this is...uh…” *Your Ex teammate and also the other half of your sharingan put the Mizukage into a genjutsu to incite complete chaos and eventually have the Mizukage killed to extract the Sanbi without any hindrance.* “So let's just say—for argument’s sake if you will—that I had to—potentially—break the Mizukage out of a genjutsu controlled by the Akatsuki? Preferably *before* they figure out who I am.”

Kakashi blinks several times. He doesn’t say a word. The silence is loud in Izuna’s ears. The drone of early autumn crickets beat a pulse into his skull. Kakashi sighs, loud and heavy, “and when did you decide to do this?”

“Like two seconds ago.”

“You don’t have a plan.”

Izuna chews the inside of his cheek. “Not yet.”

Kakashi stares at him incredulously. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Hey, a deal’s a deal.”

* * *

The start of autumn comes in a tidal wave of yellows, oranges, and reds. The forest leaves burst into their dying colors like embers. Fuu tumbleweeds herself into wind blown piles as they walk along. Izuna’s three red foxes start to disappear into the foliage. He starts to smell the cold front, just beyond Steam Country. Frost was a cold spot year-round, but the cusp of changing seasons was always a brutal time to be traveling there. He knows. He did it before, what felt like years ago. In preparation, he buckles down and finally teaches Fuu proper chakra control.

By the time they make it to the border between Steam and Frost, Fuu can almost walk up a tree. She still practices the fireball jutsu with increasing frustration and no success. At some point, she accuses Izuna of lying to her, and he demonstrates the hand signs again, and performs it perfectly.

Kakashi finally breaks and shows her the proper way to throw kunai, which she picks up almost immediately. She takes to trying out her new skills on Izuna, who catches every single one of her failed assassination attempts. Kakashi finds it endlessly amusing and sometimes throws his own kunai into the onslaught. Izuna’s starting to feel a bit ganged up on. One night, while Kakashi disappears to set up a perimeter of traps, Fuu whispers to him, “Chomei thinks it's funny. She likes that I target you for kunai practice.”

“Yeah?” Izuna humors her, “Does she hope you land one through my neck?”

Fuu shrugs, “More the eye, really.”

“Of course,” Izuna nods, “But that’s *if* you can do it though.”

“I’ll keep practicing!” And she tries to stab his kidney then and there. Izuna grabs her by the ankle and dangles her for a second. “Let me down!”

“Kakashi giving you a kunai set was the worst thing to ever come out of this journey. Are you gonna stab me again?” She swings the kunai viciously.

“Maybe. You bastard, put me the fuck down!”

“You taught you those words? It wasn’t me, was it?”

Fuu scoffs, “it was totally you, are you kidding? You swear all the time when you’re just...existing—I’m gonna get sick—” Izuna drops her and she catches herself clumsily. When she jumps up she throws the kunai again, and this time Izuna ties her to the tree and lets her wiggle around screaming bloody murder. He hears a chorus of fox laughter somewhere in the heaps of golden leaves, and also one Kakashi Hatake high up in the branches.

Their journey continues north, and things go south almost immediately. Izuna and Kakashi come to the quick decision to pick up their pace dramatically, which meant Fuu would have to either keep up or be carried. She opted to run with them, which lasts almost a full day without breaks. But she’s still young and inexperienced, so Izuna ends up carrying her. The trees and fire colored leaves are quickly replaced by massive snow drifts, cold winds edged with ice, and barren, tundra hills.

Frost Country is one massive frozen desert.

As the temperature drops, Izuna starts breathing fire to keep himself warm. His foxes also travel as a large fluffy cluster and huddle around his ankles, even as he runs. Kakashi notices his fire trick and copies it for a while, but he can’t keep it up as long as him. They run for a full day and night and another day, and finally take a break when Kakashi discovers an abandoned farmer’s hut that looks positively ancient.

“We could keep going,” Izuna mutters as they walk inside. There’s a thick layer of dust that’s been swirled around by the wind through the busted windows and blown down door. The instant he says it, a huge gust of wind cuts right through his cloak. Not even his fire can stave off the fierce chill. He shivers down to his bones. Kakashi looks at him like he wants to be smug but is too exhausted to really pull it off.

“Where did your person say we’re meeting?” Kakashi mutters as he stalks around the few rooms that are not completely destroyed. He picks up broken beams and snaps them apart into usable kindling. Fuu draws patterns in the dust.

“Lightning Country, or, that’s what he said…"There’s a sudden course of white hot lightning down his shoulder blade. Where the seal is. Where Kurama’s connection to him is physical and sometimes too incredibly real. He reaches up and rubs at it, acting like it's nothing but a sore muscle. The sudden surge in chakra is not fleeting like normal, but a long, consistent burn. He ignores it, like he’s ignored it every time.

The wind howls a particular tune. Izuna looks out the broken windows. There's something like a storm coming their way. He activates his sharingan, squinting out into the darkness, into the clouds of snow and ice flurries that block his vision. There's a tug at him, telling him to move forward, but he keeps his feet planted, keeping his mind clear.

The burning starts to get to him. He grits his teeth and stands rigid at the door. The cold sting on his face was a good distraction from what was happening. And then the seconds turn to minutes and he knows. Izuna knows that this isn't some fluke, some imprecise transfer of chakra through the seal.

Kurama is calling for him, and he's not answering.

"Did you hurt your shoulder in the fight too?" Kakashi says, and Izuna breaks from his trancelike state. He turns, opens his mouth to speak. Aka looks at him with her amber red eyes, and he shivers. She stands and whines, agitated. The others start to do the same. They pave around them and Aka paws at Izuna's feet to get him moving.

Kakashi watches them through a narrow eye. "They're acting strange," he looks at Izuna, "You have your sharingan activated-"

It hits them all at once. Kakashi freezes first. His expression goes from concerned to terrified within a split second. Fuu's chakra sparks, white and glittering like she's been holding Chomei's aura back this entire time. And Izuna curses everything there is to curse.

"Kyuubi," Kakashi whispers, "but that means…" He's out the door before Izuna can say a word. Izuna gives chase and catches up to him before he can get very far. His foxes trail after him like a blaze of fire through the white. "That chakra is the kyuubi!" Kakashi yells over the wind.

"I know," Izuna yells back, he tries to come up with something to say. *Why the hell is Kurama coming from the south?* Dread pools up in his lungs. Kakashi pushes up his Hitai-ate. His sharingan spins, he pulls out shuriken and kunai, and even his nin-ken scroll. Izuna does nothing. How is he going to explain? Why is Kurama tearing it through Frost Country at breakneck speed with his chakra like a red haze around him? Did he get into a fight?

Izuna knows that Kurama could be more subtle about the fact he's the kyuubi, and he knows that he *should* be acting just as some regular Uzumaki, but no. Not at the most crucial time apparently. He clenches his jaw, anxious and annoyed. *That stupid bastard is ruining everything.*

They make it to the storm front and are blasted by sheets of ice and wind. Kakashi barrels forward. Izuna has no choice but to continue. "This is a bad idea!" Kakashi ignores him. "Kakashi, I'm tell you this is-"

"You don't understand. The jinchuuriki for the Kyuubi is from Konoha. He's...He's important!" He's frantic.

"I do understand!" Izuna gets enough courage to body flicker in front of Kakashi. He dodges without missing a beat. Aka tries to bite his ankle to slow him down and he leaps over her

easily.

“If you’re not going to help then don’t get in my way!’ Kakashi snaps at him, furious.

Izuna clenches his jaw to keep from screaming something that would compromise his mission in the long run. Instead he silently wills Kakashi to freeze like he did before. Because it’s not going to be Naruto on the other side of this storm. Just Kurama. Just the kyuubi, and if he sees Kakashi coming at him with the intent to kill, well, Izuna’s not sure what will happen.

The lightning in his shoulder starts to scratch across his back, like knives digging in and dragging over the base of his neck and down his spine, until there’s nothing but white hot agony on half his body. He nearly stumbles, he nearly falters and gives in, but he doesn’t. Because he can’t, and because he’s had worse.

Time seems to go so slow with a sharingan. He’ll never forget the moment he sees the first hint of red in all the black and blues. He’ll never forget how Kakashi falters, stopping dead in his tracks. And he’ll never forget the way Kurama’s eyes glowed in the snowy night when he zeroes in on Kakashi, a feral snarl etching his way onto fanged teeth.

Kurama’s chakra burns the snow into a slush around his feet. Every step he takes melts and freezes snow until his path is ice and flames. He slows his sprint until he’s stomping through the drifts with purpose, menacingly slow. The closer he gets the more the air hums. And finally, when he stops a few feet from them—with his red hair flying, and red eyes glowing and his red haori fluttering in the wind—does the pressure on Izuna’s back disappear. He lets out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“What’s this?” Kurama growls, and he sounds especially demonic this time around. He visibly sees Kakashi’s soul leave his body for a second.

Kurama’s eyes flick to him, but Izuna’s not scared of him. He's never been scared of Kurama before, and he’s not now. Though his chakra is overwhelming, Izuna knows that he can subdue him even if it's only for a short period of time. But Kurama looks like hell, like a true demon, and he still looks like Naruto.

The actual Naruto pokes his head around Kurama’s mane of hair and Izuna nearly stops breathing. It’s his turn to freeze up, to stop existing, because *what the fuck? What the **fuck?** When did this happen? Why didn’t he tell me?* Kakashi, however, breaks out of his fear induced paralysis and points his kunai at Kurama.

“Who are you?”

Kurama narrows his eyes at Kakashi, then Izuna. “We don’t have time for this—” He takes a step forward. Kakashi moves to intercept him. Kurama straightens up. “Are you looking for a fight, you spineless brat?!”

“You have Konoha’s jinchuuriki,” Kakashi says, “I’m taking him back.”

Naruto, whose arms are wrapped around Kurama's neck, tightens his grip. His bright blue eyes point down into a petulant pout. "You're not taking me anywhere without Kurama!"

"His name is Naruto," Kurama hisses, "and if you don't start moving, I'll flay you alive and let the crows pick your bones!"

Kakashi moves. Forward. He throws his kunai. Kurama dodges them narrowly. Kurama doesn't attack though, but keeps backing up and dodging every time Kakashi throws something at him. They both neatly keep Naruto out of the fight, even as he clings to Kurama's back like a lifeline. Izuna watches the snow get kicked around until it's black and muddy, until they finally stop with the weapons and Kakashi goes for taijutsu, earning him scrapes and scratches from Kurama's claws. And Izuna's heart sinks lower and lower the more they fight, the more desperate both sides get, until Kurama finally lets out a growl and punches Kakashi hard enough he goes flying back. He probably broke a rib.

Kakashi lands on his feet by Izuna's side, but he stumbles heavily and almost topples into a snow drift. "Izuna," Kakashi hisses, "I can't fight him alone. He's got Naruto and I...I can't fail him. Not him...please…"

"I-"

Kurama barrels into Kakashi and they tumble in a kicking, clawing mess until Kurama finally pins Kakashi to the ground, claws at his neck. Naruto is no longer attached to his back, but he's not far behind. He rushes forward, and Izuna has only half the mind to sweep him up in his cloak to keep him away from the fight. Naruto thrashes for a second until he catches sight of Izuna, then he stops.

"You're Izuna…" Naruto whispers, "Kurama told me."

The air fills with Kurama's fiery, hate filled chakra. It sweeps over the snow and blazes away the cold until it's all fire in Izuna's lungs, and he's is ripped out of that little moment.

"Izuna, I wouldn't say this any other time but put this brat in a genjutsu. We don't have time to hash this out right now!"

He can pinpoint the exact millisecond Kakashi figures it out. The betrayal in his eyes, he will never forget that. Izuna is trapped there for what feels like an infinity between two seconds. And he wonders what he could've done differently in this second chance. And he thinks, maybe, that fate will always make him the betrayer.

"Izuna?"

"Sasuke!" Kurama shouts.

His sharingan spins. Kakashi's eyes roll back into his head, and he goes limp.

~Some Art~

Chapter End Notes

So...

Moving on from that....

this is my favorite chapter, I'd love to hear which ones are you favorites! Thank you all for reading as usual, and for all the amazing comments and kudos! They really encourage me to keep writing this fic 0v0

Drawing Kurama's portrait has yet again reminded me that I don't have a set style, let me know what you think!

Through the Looking Glass

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Itachi can barely feel the ice biting at the exposed skin of his forearms and neck. He can't feel the breeze on his face, nor the crunch of snow under his feet. He can't feel anything. Only his heart beat pumping blood into his ears, roaring into his head, pounding behind his eyes. And all he sees is that pulse of red slowly fading in and out, in and out, being pulled by the black and blue of the blistering blizzard night. And all he knows is that Itachi can't fail here. He *won't* fail here.

Shisui is by his side, has been for four straight days. Because the red man never rests, that red eyed *Uzumaki* never rests. So they don't have that luxury. Him and Shisui are the best of the Anbu forces, and after those grueling days of flash fire fights and long, treacherous nights spent detangling webs of intricate seals, the rest of their teams got lost somewhere at the start of the storm. They first got scattered almost immediately when the man spun around and attacked them with enough vicious energy to rival the kyuubi itself. It only confirmed Itachi's suspicions.

He is a jinchuuriki.

Now, as they barrel through Frost Country without a thought of stopping, Itachi doesn't think they'll catch him. They're following frozen foot prints, and that red is nothing but a mirage, a conjuring of a sharingan reflecting on the backs of Itachi's eyes. The faint trace of malice hanging in the air tastes like ashes in the back of his mouth. Shisui leads ahead by a couple of paces. Itachi sent out a couple of crows, but in this weather, they're nearly useless. Still, he can use their eyes.

"Wait!" Shisui throws a hand out so fast that it catches Itachi across the stomach and he's flung onto his back. He slides a little on the sudden patch of ice. Itachi rights himself and glares at Shisui through his mask, but he's not even looking. Instead, he's studying the ice. "This was melted just like those footprints. They're from the target's chakra."

Itachi surveys the area. Most of it is covered in low dunes of windswept snow. But under that, he can see prints, lots and lots of paw prints. They converge and circle around one specific area. There's also gouges in the snow and permafrost, almost completely covered by now.

"A fight," Itachi concludes.

Shisui nods, "Three people—wait, four? These are smaller, I think he put Naruto down to fight."

"And foxes," Itachi points out. *Of course it has to be foxes…*

Shisui points to something over Itachi's shoulder. "There's one now." Itachi follows his line of sight and spots a pair of reflective eyes staring out at them, just over a ridge of ice. The

little creature is barely visible against the dark sky. He could make out a fuzzy black outline with his sharingan, but that was all. The creature disappears behind the snow as soon as Itachi spots it. A blast of wind makes him shiver violently.

“Creepy,” Shisui mutters. He goes back to analyzing the scene. “Someone attacked him here, they started fighting and our target backed away, the attacker ended up here. Then,” Shisui uses his hands to talk, he points out the footprints and the streaks in the snow as he goes, “he puts Naruto down here, and...Naruto runs forward, to…” They stare at the stampede of fox prints. In the middle, barely there, are the fourth set of prints. Before Shisui can continue, Itachi spots the black fox again, this time it gets a bit closer. It stares at Itachi with its green-white eyes.

The back of his neck prickles.

Itachi crouches low to the ground and readies a wire line of shuriken. Shisui does the same. They wait, perfectly still, as the blizzard howls around them, as the moon inches along the sky. The shadow fox makes its way forward agonizingly, intentionally slow. Once it's close enough that Itachi can make out its features, he sucks in an icy breath.

“Two tails…” Shisui says on a breath. He readies himself for attack.

Itachi latches onto his forearm before he can rush forward. “Hold it, we don’t know if it's friendly or not.”

Shisui glares at him, “You saw the prints, whoever controls the foxes also took off with Naruto!”

“But we don’t know if they’re on the same side as our target.” Itachi reasons, “this fox could lead us to them.”

“Or him to us,” Shisui snaps back, but he reluctantly lowers his weapons.

The fox gets close, a kunai throw away, before it stops abruptly, and with a flash of bright purple fire, it leaps into the sky. Shisui drops his stance to openly gape at the creature. The two watch it swirl higher and higher until they can only see the hints of purple through the dark storm clouds. A crack of lightning splits the sky, and the fox is gone.

A thump on the snow jolts them both out of their awe. Itachi springs back on reflex, but then he nearly drops his weapon when he sees a looming figure in the circle of fox prints. The man has jet black hair, one visible black eye, and a black cloak that brushes the snows around him. Over his shoulder is another person, unconscious. Itachi’s skin prickles when he recognises the Konoha standard uniform.

“Who are you?” Shisui yells. He stands, sharingan spinning already. “And what is—” Shisui stops. Itachi stands as well, and the two get their second dose of disbelief of the night.

“I’m… returning something.” The shadowy man carefully lowers the body to the ground, at Shisui’s feet. All it takes is a hint of silver white hair for them to both jump forward. “Kakashi?!” They shout at the same time. Their captain is out cold. His head tilts to the side,

face lacking any expression, when Shisui pulls his eyelid up, it's white. Itachi stares up at the stranger, who refuses to look at him. He doesn't look at either of them, just stares down at his own feet. And Itachi sees it then, in the depths of all that black, there is red.

"Are you…an Uchiha?" He whispers. As if confirmation, the man's eye flashes red. Itachi catches a Mangekyo pattern, and he gasps involuntarily. Shisui narrows his eyes suspiciously.

"What are you doing out here, and with Kakashi?"

The man doesn't look at Shisui. Instead, his eyes lift, staring right into Itachi's soul. And it's chilling, what he sees there, reflecting back at him. In the stranger's face he sees his own. He sees a ghost.

He sees Sasuke.

A confusing well of emotions starts pulling at his chest.

"When he wakes up, tell him I'm sorry. For everything." The man whispers, almost so quietly that it sounds like the wind. And then, just like that, the man disappears in a swirl of black and blue. Shisui's mouth drops open. Itachi can't move. It's as if the cold frosty winds had finally eaten into his very bones, down to the depths of his soul, and he stares at the spot that Uchiha had been, and all he can think of is his brother.

"Itachi," Shisui puts a hand on his shoulder, and it's enough to shock him out of his thoughts. "Help me with Kakashi. We need to get out of this storm. Regroup with the squad. And send a crow back to Konoha."

"He was Uchiha," Itachi whispers to his cousin. "You saw. His eye-" *his face.*

"Mangekyo," Shisui confirms, his eyes narrow behind the mask. "I haven't seen you this shaken in a while. C'mon, we have work to do."

Right, Kakashi. He looks down at his captain, who looks half dead in the snow. There's a few scratches on his shoulders and chest that look dangerously familiar, if his own fight with the red man was anything to go by. More and more pieces start to fit together. *We shouldn't have let that Uchiha disappear. We might never see him again.* And if they did...what would they do? Would they fight him? Their own flesh and blood? They would have to, wouldn't they. Him and Shisui and all the other Uchiha, if directed, would have to fight that mysterious Uchiha if he was a threat to the village. There was no way around it. And from the look of Kakashi, the man had a part to play in this whole fiasco.

Shisui kneels next to Kakashi's head and puts one hand on his chest and the other flits through a hand sign. "Release," he mutters out loud. Itachi can see the chakra shift as the genjutsu is dispelled. They wait for a long, treacherous second. Kakashi doesn't move. Shisui clicks his tongue. "That's not good."

"He's lost a lot of blood," Itachi points out.

“His wounds have already been healed,” Shisui says after a closer look, “we can’t do anything else but wait for him to wake up.” He stands, “Well, we can’t stay here. We’ll freeze to death. Let’s turn back for now.”

Itachi nods once. He helps Shisui pick up their captain. It’s a bit awkward, they’re still teenagers and very much shorter than Kakashi, but eventually Shisui shoos Itachi off and he ends up carrying Kakashi half way before Itachi takes over. He ends up sending out a couple of crows just as daybreak starts to pierce through the thick viel of snow clouds. It takes another few hours, but the crows eventually lead them to a small village on the side of an ice slushed river. The crows continue on to inform the rest of the anbu about the location.

Itachi is not so keen on staying at an inn, but Shisui finally talks him into it. For a compromise, they take off their masks and use henges as common travelers. They have responsibilities as anbu to not be caught, to be secretive, and to stay hidden no matter what. Staying in a populated civilian area wasn’t the worst, but not the greatest either. Shisui rents out one room and also an incredibly large, very self indulgent dinner to be delivered later that day. Itachi silently glares daggers at the back of his head which he completely ignores.

Once they’re in the room, Itachi sets about trapping and sealing up the entire place. He goes a bit overboard, but something tells him that if that Uchiha wants in, he’d get in no matter what. Shisui sets Kakashi down on a bedroll and starts helping Itachi with the traps. And then everything that can be done, has been done.

Itachi sits there with his legs tucked under him and stares at Kakashi like it’ll wake him up any sooner. Shisui doesn’t settle, however. He paces back and forth until it starts driving Itachi insane, and right before he tells him to go outside, Shisui snaps his fingers together. “I’m going to scout out the area.” He says abruptly, and then body flickers out the next second.

He lets out the breath he’s been holding. Shisui was, and always has been, a restless soul. Unlike Itachi who could sit and stew in his thoughts for days on end. It was a problem, actually, because now he sits there. And he thinks about that Uchiha. He thinks about that fox with its blackened fur and two tails and purple fire. And he thinks about the swirling vortex that swallowed the man like a shadow. He thinks about how the man’s cloak had shimmered, with patterns of waves that were oh so familiar. And he thinks about the red man, and his red hair and red eyes, and his red haori with the waves—oh.

Itachi opens his eyes he didn’t know he’d closed. *They’re the same.* The same pattern. A pattern of waves. An Uzumaki and an Uchiha working together. Working against Konoha, and who knows what else. He thinks about Naruto. He thinks about Sasuke. He feels he’s onto something, something just at the edge of his consciousness. A spider’s thread, and if he could grab it, pull it to him, then that web of truth would come undone. If only he could *see* the truth.

Kakashi’s eyes fly open and he sits up in one fell swoop. The moment before he sees Itachi is filled with enough anger to rival the red man’s. In the next moment, when he spots Itachi sitting in the corner, all his fight drains out of him. He falls back onto the bed roll and puts his face in his hands. Itachi doesn’t say a word.

“How long?” Kakashi mutters after a while.

“We don’t know, but it’s been almost half a day since Shisui broke the genjutsu.”

Kakashi stares at him from the side of his sharingan eye. His silence tells Itachi to continue. “A...uhm... “ The words die in his throat.

Kakashi’s eyes narrow. “It’s not often that you’re at a loss for words, Itachi.”

Itachi’s mouth pulls into a line. An almost smile. “No, I guess it’s not.”

“So,” Kakashi sits up this time. He sighs heavily, like the weight of the whole universe is resting on his shoulders. “Just lay out the facts, one at a time.”

“A black fox with two tails showed up.”

“Karasu,” Kakashi nods.

Itachi stares at him, “it has a name? You *know* it’s name.”

Kakashi waves him off, “continue.”

“Then a man—an *Uchiha* —showed up. He was carrying you. And then he left you with us and vanished.”

That gave Kakashi pause. At the mention of the man, his eyes had gone dark. Itachi knew that look. Hurt of a certain kind. *Betrayal.* But it was followed by confusion. “He did what? *He’s* the one who…? You didn’t have to fight him?”

I think we would’ve died if we tried. “No. He just…” *Stepped into a vortex.* “He just told me to tell you that...he’s sorry. For everything.”

Kakashi blinks a couple of times, then looks down at the floor. He doesn’t say anything about that. But Itachi has known his captain for a while, and he knows grief when he sees it, when he sees Kakashi pretending to lounge around the anbu office.

“Also…” Itachi pokes his shoulder, the one where the fabric was torn down to his skin. But though there was a good deal of crusted blood, no wounds remained. Not even a scar. “We weren’t the ones who healed you.” It’s almost comical the way Kakashi pats himself down with a flurry of moves, especially the large claw marks that had basically shredded through his jacket.

“But…” Kakashi says, more to himself than anything, “Izuna didn’t use chakra to heal himself...why would he...then it wasn’t…”

If this Izuna wasn’t the one who healed him, then either some other person on their team did, or the red man himself. Itachi has a hard time picturing any other person between the Uzumaki and Uchiha, but he can’t picture the red man stopping to heal Kakashi after shredding through all the anbu who came after him,

“That’s his name,” Itachi confirms. “Izuna.” It sounded familiar in a way that felt important. He recalls, from the recesses of his recent memory, that one of his aunts had called Sasuke a miniature ‘Izuna.’

“Izuna is Madara’s younger brother.” Itachi says, matter of fact.

“Yeah, well, I don’t think it’s actually *that* Izuna. This one’s a lot more...feral, than your typical Uchiha.”

“Like Shisui.”

“Who’s like me?” Shisui busts down the door.

Itachi glares at him. “You better set those traps back before I have to.”

Shisui ignores him. “Glad that you’re alive, Kakashi. Now,” he plops down next to Itachi, who immediately shoves him. The mood is effectively lightened. “Why were you all the way out in Frost Country anyway?” And effectively darkened.

Kakashi shuts his eyes like he’s willing for them to leave him alone. Itachi knows that feeling well, but in this instance, his curiosity outweighed his sympathy. Also, they needed the information. For both their mission, and their clan.

“I think the Hokage might murder me when I get back. I fucked this up, big time.”

Itachi latches onto that instantly. “You were betrayed. You can’t be blamed.”

“How do you even—nevermind,” Kakashi rubs his temples. “So, I was tasked with finding this bounty hunter who had made a name for himself by killing Sasori the red sand.” Shisui and Itachi look at each other. They knew that name, vaguely. “Izuna hadn’t actually claimed to be Uchiha, but it's kind of obvious if you just look at him, right?” Its said with some humor, like its the most obvious thing in the world. If Itachi knew better, *fond* would be a good word for what Kakashi sounded like.

“Right,” Itachi and Shisui say at the same time. Kakashi looks from one to the other.

“So my mission was to find and confirm if he was Uchiha or not—”

“Why didn’t they send an actual Uchiha then?” Shisui hisses, “I mean, I *know* we’re not well liked, but that’s a bit on the nose, isn’t it? If the village wants to make peace with the Uchiha, then this is *not* the way to do it.”

Kakashi shakes his head slightly. “It wasn’t up to me. I asked too, and the Hokage just...he told me it was because an Uchiha might judge Izuna based on his last name, rather than him as a person. But...I mean…”

It didn’t need to be said.

Kakashi continued, “So I found Izuna first in Rice Country...actually, I caught him in the middle of a battle. I believe his name was Kakuzu. After that we went to Taki and there…”

Kakashi freezes like he's been doused with ice water. Itachi sees him smile through his mask. Slight, impossibly sad, it doesn't reach his eyes. "I've been a fool."

"You were *betrayed,* Kakashi," Itachi reminds him again.

"No, actually, I don't think I was. I was just...deceived. Somehow, I don't think he lied. If I asked a question he didn't like, he would just not answer."

Itachi has a bad feeling about this. "What did he do, besides knock you out?"

"Well, I think I accidentally assisted in the kidnapping of Taki's jinchuuriki."

Shisui's mouth falls open. He shuts it just as quick. "Are...are you sure?"

Kakashi nods, "If he's working with the red man, and the red man takes jinchuuriki, then...then she was probably one too."

Shisui sputters in disbelief. "Wait, back track. You went to Taki, and then… he just *took* their jinchuuriki? And they didn't come after you? What the hell…"

"I'm not sure how they did it actually. You see, that's the confusing thing. Izuna refused to let me follow him into Taki. He said he didn't want to start a war, that if I was there, Konoha would get blamed."

Itachi was starting to understand, but there were still too many pieces missing. It's possible that Izuna *wasn't* a threat to Konoha. Except for one, glaring problem. His relations to the red man. But then again, ' *tell him I'm sorry. for everything.'* Something was amiss. Was he being forced to act on the red man's behalf? Izuna regretted what he did Kakashi at least. Was it personal then? Was he sorry to Kakashi specifically, or to what Kakashi represented; Konoha? Did it matter? "He was right, if you'd been discovered, it would have started a war."

"He said that he was going to 'rescue' some kid. And I guess...well…" Kakashi stares off into nothing. "He was right, in a way. But her being a jinchuuriki would change everything. I only went along with it because I thought the girl was just some high ranking official's daughter or something, or maybe she was a political prisoner. She kept saying that Izuna was going to take her to her family so I thought that it was fine… either way it didn't affect Konoha." His eyes narrow, "We got attacked on the way by a missing nin from Kiri and Izuna saved her life, and mine. We were supposed to meet the person who would take her and then go to Kiri to sort...other things, before coming back to Konoha-" *other things.* Itachi makes a note to ask about that in detail, "but then-"

"But then the red man," Itachi fills in, "turned out to be Izuna's contact. And he's a jinchuuriki who took Naruto from Konoha. It's safe to say that he's taken...no," Itachi remembers then, what the man said to Naruto that day he snatched him away. "He *offers* to take the jinchuuriki away from their villages."

Kakashi nods, "Izuna said that too, he said that if she didn't want to go, then he wouldn't take her...so Naruto left the village on his own…"

He ignores that last comment, because it was the glaring truth that all of them were ignoring. Naruto *had* left. But he was also seven years old and easily persuaded. “This is a lot more serious than just one jinchuuriki going missing,” Itachi mutters, “he’s orchestrating something, he’s...how do we know how many jinchuuriki have already gone to him?”

“That’s a good point, the villages never say if their jinchuuriki go missing, it’ll make them a target. Hell, the Hokage kept this fiasco under wraps,” Shisui says, “There's no knowing...Itachi, send a crow with all the available information back to the Hokage and warn him to tell the other villages.”

Itachi nods once and stands. He goes to the door, and before he can pull it open, he pauses. Shisui and Kakashi catch on quickly, both of them back up and arm themselves. Itachi internally screams at Shisui for not resetting the alarms that warn them of anyone passing by their room. He activates his sharingan, and he sees a shape of chakra that is decisively not human. In one quick motion, he tears the door open, and in the next he straightens up again. He tells himself that it's not fear, not when he looks the creature in its pitch black eyes and sees nothing but his silhouette reflected in them. He tries to will himself into the fox’s mind, and is refused.

Its fur seems darker in the day, like it sucked in all the light around it. Only the tips of its swishing twin tails are white as snow. The fox holds a turquoise scroll in its mouth. A scroll with patterns of blue waves and a tassel of a small metal fox. At this point Itachi thinks of those waves as a mockery. He’ll be seeing the pattern in his sleep.

“Karasu,” Kakashi says with finality, almost a snarl, “if I recall, even Izuna called *you* a little traitor,” Itachi steps a little to the side. Its two tails swish back and forth, calming in a way. Itachi looks between Kakashi and the fox, Karasu. They're glaring at each other. Something like lightning seems to spark through the room. After the fox checks Itachi, it looks to Shisui, who also, undoubtedly, tries to cast a genjutsu, and undoubtedly, he fails. It’s only then, when Shisui clicks his tongue in frustration, that the fox lifts a single paw and places it inside their room. When nothing happens, it moves forward. Karasu is silent, and calm, and he moves like a shadow on the wall.

Once he’s directly in the middle of the room, he sits. And he holds his eyes forward. He doesn’t look at any one of them. Shisui and Itachi swivel their heads to Kakashi for directions. Their captain scowls back at the both of them. *The scroll, right? He’s a messenger.* Itachi places his kunai on the floor, then crouches down to Karasu’s level. He holds his hand out. Karasu stares at him for a second, and then he lets out an eerily human laugh. *He's mocking me.* He turns resolutely away from Itachi.

“He probably wants Kakashi to take it,” Itachi says, standing, “You’re the one he knows, right?” *You're the one Izuna trusts.*

Kakashi scoffs, “As if. I saw him maybe three times. He’s a lurker, he’s not like the other foxes.”

“The other foxes.” Shisui repeats. “How many *are* there?”

“Seven. Five reds, though two were actually silver, and two fennec. I guess eight if we include *this jackass."* He pauses, " Izuna prioritizes their lives over his own sometimes.”

“So they’re precious to him…” Itachi mutters, “if this one doesn’t return he’ll probably see it as a personal attack.”

“This one’s different. Izuna called him a traitor. I think this one was the link between him and the red man. I saw him writing sometimes, I assume Karasu delivered the messages. When I was fighting as well, he didn't join in, only knocked me out. I don't know the relation between him and the red man, but I doubt it's that straight forward." *Or you were the one that complicated things.*

“Will you just take the damn scroll so we can see what this is about?” Shisui snaps at them, “Stop wondering, the answers might just be *in the scroll.”*

Kakashi grumbles some more about Shisui’s lack of tact. When he holds out his hand, Karasu looks at him, then he pads forward and places the scroll gently in his palm. He sits back down and watches. Unblinking.

“He’s not leaving.” Shisui says in wonder, “normally they’d leave.”

“He won’t leave until I reply,” Kakashi says. “Wherever they are, I doubt we’ll be able to find them by normal means.” He reads the label on the scroll. He stops for a moment, then rereads it. He hesitates before he speaks again. “If… If either of you try to read this scroll, Karasu will burn it and leave, and all negotiations will cease. Indefinitely.”

“Negotiations?” Itachi says.

“He’ll what?” Shisui says at the same time. “We’re leaving this up the fox? What if he burns the scroll by accident?”

“Just stay there, don’t try to attempt anything with a sharingan. We’ll see what he has to say. He didn’t say anything about me relaying this information to you, only that you can’t read it.”

Which means Izuna expects Kakashi to keep somethings to himself.

Chapter End Notes

I drank like two cups of coffee and forgot to eat anything, looked on social media and felt bad, read a fic and felt bad because I 've been starting and restarting this chapter for like, days. Couldn't write all day so I sat there and stewed in my own anxiety until I used this as an excuse to not do my summer class homework, and volia, I could write again.

I had no idea who a good perspective for this chapter would be, because there's so many interesting things. I could write about Kakashi's feelings, I could write about Izuna's.

Instead, I decided, like a moron, to write about an outside perspective looking into their budding (and subsequently destroyed) friendship because thats just. *chefs kiss* love me oblivious idiots. I don't know where I'm taking this, I'm kind of just, flying by the seat of my pants. :DDDD

Originally, I thought it would be fun as well if Itachi actually heard Kurama calling Izuna 'Sasuke' and Izuna sending Itachi into a genjutsu that showed him the massacre and then I thought "damn, that's kind of a bastard move, even for sasuke/Izuna" so I scrapped it. the time is not right for him to know. Not now...soon. Maybe.

Also, I love that I'm trying so desperately to present this situation as grey as possible, and everyone is like "Fuck, I wish Konoha would B U RN" and I'm honestly loving the energy we're creating here.

Arise fair Sun and Kill the Envious Moon

Chapter Notes

> Y'all are just gonna have to wait and suffer to see what Izuna wrote in that scroll because there are So Many Things to flesh out before hand so lol. Whoops, should have planned that better but whats a story without a little non-linear narrative?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama's fight drains out him within milliseconds. Once the danger is clear, his malicious bright red, bubbly chakra turns to nothing but a dream on the snow blown winds. He huffs out a plume of black smoke and rolls off Kakashi, dousing himself in a pile of snow like he was physically burning. He wasn't, but anyone could tell his chakra was eating that form alive. If Izuna wasn't having a mental battle of his own, he would be more concerned.

He grips Naruto tightly in his arms like the boy was the only anchor in this universe. For Izuna, he might as well be. He stares down at Kakashi's unconscious face, and he knows that he's made a terrible decision. But at least he was alive. At least he didn't cut this bond root and stem.

Everything rushes in his ears again. That name Kurama had called out, and all the ears around to hear it. He jolts forward, mechanically crouching down next to Kakashi while Naruto takes one look at the Konoha-nin before burying his face into Izuna's shoulder, like he can't stand to see him. Izuna wishes he could do the same, that he had the luxury to look away. But he doesn't. He can't.

He lifts Kakashi's eyelid, and he buries himself into Kakashi's mind, searching for just his name, and nothing else. There's a lot that he sees in those memories. He sees himself through Kakashi's eye. Sees how much emotion flits across his own face, how easily he lets his mask slip, sees all the sorrow in black eyes. Izuna doesn't stay long. He pinpoints the very moment Kurama says his name, his *real* name, and that's the only thing he takes. He plucks those seconds from his memory and scatters them. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. The whole situation does.

He steps back and surveys the snow. Their scuffle was much too obvious. Izuna couldn't wipe away their tracks easily. Kurama himself stands up and shakes snowflakes out of his hair.

"Lets go, brat. Your little sharingan clan is just over the hills," Kurama says. He makes a move to take Naruto, but Izuna turns his body away. Kurama's blood red eyes narrow dangerously, but he doesn't say a word, not when Naruto hasn't complained, hasn't said anything either. Izuna looks at Kurama's claws, at the red he's painted all over himself. *Kakashi's blood on his hands.*

“Heal him,” Izuna says.

Kurama tilts his head, the start of a snarl in the curl of his lip. “I just told you his little squad will be here soon, so don’t bother.”

Izuna squares himself with Kurama, who starts to walk off in the wrong direction. “You’re just gonna leave him? In the snow?” He asks, incredulously.

“Follow,” Kurama bares his teeth, looking so much like a wild beast that he almost does it on pure instinct. His treacherous foxes leap at the opportunity. Izuna steels himself and plants his feet firmly on the ice.

Before he can get a word out, Naruto whirls in his grip and shouts, “You can’t leave him!” Kurama spins like he’s off balance and stares at the boy with clear disbelief. “He’ll die, won’t he?” Naruto says, much much sullen. He looks close to tears. Izuna stares at Naruto, the little boy who will grow up into a version of Naruto, who *is* a version of Naruto. Of course he’d say these foolish words, and of course Kurama would comply. Izuna focuses his attention back to Kurama, who looks between the two with clear resignation.

“Egh,” the right edge of his lip curls in disgust. “Not here.”

“I know where, I can get us there,” Izuna says immediately. “I left Fuu there.”

“By herself?!” Kurama roars, “When we’re this close to enemies? How stupid are you!?”

Izuna’s temper flares, he sends a flash of chakra through their seal that he knows stings Kurama’s shoulder like a knife wound. “There was no time! Kakashi ran out because he sensed your stupid chakra. Why aren’t you hiding it, anyway?”

Kurama snarls for real this time. He throws his hands up in a show of annoyance before he slings Kakashi’s unconscious body over his shoulder. “Whatever, don’t say I never did anything for you, Izuna. Get us out of here.”

“You’re only doing it because of Naruto…” Izuna hisses back.

“Sorry,” Naruto whispers, and the two instantly stop, “I didn’t mean to-”

“You’ve done nothing wrong.” he reaches up and puts his hand on Naruto’s head. He weaves yellow-gold strands through his fingers. He makes sure to look Naruto in his eyes, when he says this. Then Izuna glares up at Kurama with all the hate he can muster. It’s not hard when looking at him feels like pouring salt on fresh wounds. “Kurama just needs to remember that us mere humans can’t survive out in the snow.”

Kurama flips him off, causing Naruto to start giggling. There’s more to be said, away from young ears. Izuna wants to rip Kurama’s eyes out for forcing his hand. He shifts Naruto to hold him with one hand, then uses the other to push his hair out of his face. Naruto gasps at the sight of his purple eye.

‘That’s so cool,” He breathes. Izuna lets himself smile a bit, almost smug. “What is it?”

“Rinnegan. Just watch, kid.” he concentrates his chakra, and then his sight. He burns the memory of the abandoned house into his mind, down to the sweep of dust on the walls and the creak of wood on the floor. With a pulse and pull of his chakra, he manifests a black swirling vortex.

“Woah!” Naruto starts to wiggle in his grip, but Izuna doesn’t let him go. “That’s crazy! Where does it go?”

“Away from here.” Kurama mutters. They watch as he pokes the tear in space and time before sticking his whole arm in. Kurama jumps in once he deems it safe. Aka leads the skulk, and they jump into the darkness one by one. “Ready?” He asks Naruto, who nods silently for once. Izuna leaps through the portal. Naruto holds his breath and screws his eyes shut.

On the other side, Fuu screams bloody murder as the four of them and seven disoriented beasts drop into the house. A kunai flies. Kurama catches it on the loop, then spins it lazily on his finger. He eyes Fuu critically. It breaks within seconds when Fuu pops her head out from behind a half-destroyed wall to see who had invaded her campspace. “Oh,” she sighs in relief, “You’re Kurama.”

Her eyes roam over them. They latch onto Kakashi and she sucks in a quick breath. “What happened to him!?” Fuu bounds over to them but she hesitates a couple feet away. She looks to Izuna, eyes bright with worry and questions.

“Remember when I said I might have to do something drastic if he found out?” Izuna says as calmly as he can.

Fuu’s shoulders drop. “So...he reacted badly? Why would he…”

“Things are complicated, kid,” Kurama chides, he ruffles her hair before motioning for Izuna to follow.

“Who are you?” Naruto asks as Izuna finally lets him down. The two of them hover around each other for a second, before recognition sparks.

“You’re like me!” They both shout. It devolves into chaos from there. While the two start yapping each other’s ears off, they find a seperate part of the house and he puts Kakashi down on the floor. Aka, Kurome, and Hokori follow them in, while the rest of the reds start up a game of tag with the kids.

He sneers at Izuna as he drops down on the left side of Kakashi, while Kurama crouches on the right. Kurome jumps on Izuna’s shoulder. Aka takes her sentinel position at Kakashi’s feet. “You’ve grown terribly fond of your old sensei, Izuna.” He says with both venom and amusement. “I would’ve expected that from Naruto. You surprise me, brat.”

Izuna doesn’t give an inch. “Just do it already. You’re the one short for time.”

Kurama grins that wicked grin of his. He puts his hands together and shuts his eyes. For a minute, nothing happens. Then an all too familiar light starts to glow from Kurama’s body.

Izuna clenches his teeth to keep from flinching, but when Kurama opens his eyes again, they're pure gold, and that steals the breath from his lungs. Izuna forces himself to look down at Kakashi, to look at the mess they'd both created, Kurama with his claws, and Izuna with his eyes. Mentally and physically, Kakashi was not okay right now, and that was all that matters.

They had to fix this.

Kurama puts one glowing hand on Kakashi's middle, and the chakra instantly envelopes him. "I can't pinpoint heal wounds like a medic," Kurama mutters, "all I can do is give my chakra, and he heals himself. It's why Naruto never had any lasting wounds. All jinchuuriki are intrinsically like this." Kurama sniffs, "at least the wounds were shallow, so I won't have to use so much."

Izuna glares up at Kurama, "You broke two of his ribs with that kick alone."

"Oh? Did I?" Kurama smiles like an innocent fox. Which is to say, not innocent at all. Izuna has been seeing that expression plastered all over Aka's face for weeks. He scoffs.

Slowly, the wounds start to stitch themselves together. Kakashi doesn't move even an inch through all of it. It wasn't like he was naturally unconscious, Izuna's genjutsu had him in a comatose state. It was probably for the better.

"I hate this." Izuna says suddenly. He wants to be angry. He wants to yell at Kurama for using his eyes just as everyone before had used them. He wants to scream that the world was unfair, that he was the one who would always end up betraying someone. Why did he have to choose?

"You were the one who wanted me to have a name, and you don't even use it?" Izuna hisses quietly. It's the only thing he can do to keep from shouting. To keep all his anger and rage and sorrow from bubbling over. He could cry, and he'd hate himself for it. Kurama looks up at him again. All his red has washed out into yellows and whites and golds. Izuna sucks in a quick breath. Tears threaten to spill. He looks like Naruto, more than Naruto himself in the next room. *He looks like my Naruto.* "Don't look at me like that."

Kurama's face shifts into his typical growl. It's only a small relief. "This is my face, Uchiha brat. You're going to have to get used to it."

"Don't-"

"Don't what?" Kurama taunts bitterly, "Don't exist around you? You don't think I see him too? I have to live with myself, and I have to stare at this face every time I catch my reflection. I have to feel these bones that aren't mine, and this blood that was his, and all this *fucking hair.* Do you think it's easy to live in this form? To have this body now?"

Izuna stays quiet. Kurama scoffs, annoyed. He focuses on Kakashi and ignores Izuna when he drills holes into the top of his head. They don't speak until Kurama's finished. He takes his hands away and the glow dies. His hair and eyes turn back into their violent red. It doesn't

make Izuna breathe easily. All it does is remind him of Naruto burning from the inside out. Burning before his very eyes.

“I know grief,” Kurama clenches his teeth like it's painful to admit that the great kyuubi has feelings. Izuna already knew that, he’s been seeing Kurama’s feelings since before they landed here. “I know that when you look at me all you feel is pain. I don’t care,” Kurama did not sound like he didn’t care at that moment, “but whatever you do, *you can’t* look at Naruto like that. He’s dealt with it already. It’s how people in Konoha look at him. When it’s not hate, it’s pain. Or, rather, they’re one in the same.”

Izuna stays quiet. He wouldn’t dream of it. Naruto was small and tiny and filled with sunshine and storm clouds. He wasn’t like Izuna’s Naruto. Somehow, after finally seeing him, after finally seeing sky blue eyes and bright yellow hair and whisker marks all over again, he can accept that they were in a different time. They were on the other side. But Kurama wasn’t a part of that acceptance, because Kurama was from his time.

“I won’t.” Izuna promises. He shuts his eyes to gather up his thoughts again.

Kurama stands and goes to leave, most likely to check on the two kids and four foxes running the rickety old building into nothing but snow and dust. Izuna can hear their stepeding feet rumbling the walls. “We’re moving soon. You’re not bringing him, I won’t compromise on that.”

The wind howls. Izuna wishes he could be whisked away in a flurry of snow. He opens his eyes and stares down at his once sensei. He wishes it was last week. He wishes he was twelve again. “I understand.”

* * *

Naruto takes an instant liking to the foxes, to no one’s surprise. Izuna watches them as they run, watches how the five reds swarm around Kurama and Naruto. They would bound up and jump. Naruto would scream with laughter and reach out to try to pet them as they streaked past. The game soon involved Fuu as well. She chased Gin and Yuki around in circles, and the silver foxes tried many times to take refuge on Izuna’s shoulders. The fennec’s had secluded themselves inside Izuna’s cloak, the weather too distant from their usual dry heat desert for them to participate.

Kurama had a new route planned, changing it to accommodate Izuna and seven fuzzy creatures who did not use chakra regularly. At first, Kurama had wanted to make the journey by sea alone. Izuna, despite his decent stamina, was no Uzumaki, and definitely no bijuu. Kurama, though he refused to admit it, hadn’t slept in days and was probably running on fumes. They needed time to rest. Too bad Frost Country was so unforgiving. And Kurama was being a pain and refusing to stop at any civilian villages.

They ran due east without any breaks. Fuu ended up being carried by Kurama, while Izuna took hold of Naruto again. This led to some interesting things with the foxes, as their reservations around Kurama were non-existent with Izuna, and he ended up getting

pummeled to the ground several times before he had to call off their game. Naruto complained endlessly, but was quieted when he discovered the two hidden fennecs that also found him. It took all but two seconds for Kurome and Hokori to borrow into Naruto's shirt and stay there.

"They're just your size," Izuna says to him and Naruto punches his shoulder. He grimaces, and somehow that must have been the funniest thing Naruto had ever seen. He laughs so hard he cries. Izuna gets the feeling it's not just the joke that causes it. Naruto is happy. It gets infectious when Kurama, of all people, gets tripped by Aka and the two roll half way down a snow dune. Fuu has enough sense to leap off Kurama's back before he falls, and she lands lightly on her feet.

Izuna stops and doubles over. Fuu falls onto her back and rolls around in the snow in hysteria. Kurama crawls back up the hill, with his face as red as his hair, and he instantly takes his embarrassment out on Izuna with a flying kick that he avoids by millimeters.

It's hard to be anxious when Naruto and Fuu were there. But it nags the back of Izuna's mind, that maybe they weren't going fast enough. Maybe, when they stop on the shore, they'll be attacked. Maybe they were tracked, even though Karasu has been covering their tracks for miles now, and the constant blizzard made it impossible to smell anything but ice. He lets himself fall into the moment. Izuna lets himself breathe easily, even when Kurama is there with his red hair and familiar face. Even as Naruto and Gin have a climbing contest with Izuna as the playground, even when all the things he's done weigh heavy in his mind.

Just one breath. He allows himself to live in this moment. Like he lived in the moments between the trees, between sunlight through the leaves. He could live here, with Naruto and Fuu and Kurama, and all his foxes swarming him. Bright reds and warm yellows and sparkling golds among all the blues and blacks and whites.

It's all too soon that the kids get tired and start to drift. Kurama and Izuna don't have that luxury, so they keep going, keeping their upper bodies as still as possible to not disturb them. Without the distraction, there is nothing but the crunch of snow under their feet, and the howling autumn wind.

"We need a way to stall them." Kurama says after hours of silence between them. Izuna has enough dignity not to stumble. When he doesn't answer, Kurama glares at him from the corner of his eye. "You really got attached to him, didn't you?"

"So did Fuu," Izuna snaps back, realizing belatedly that he's confirmed Kurama's question. He clicks his tongue. "What I did wasn't right."

"Erasing one memory is hardly the worst thing you've done."

"It's not right!" Izuna snaps. "I'm not supposed to be repeating the things I've done, but I am. I'm ignoring and hurting the people I've made friends with, and I'm running away from my problems. My clan...I have no idea if they even know I exist yet and I… I should be with them. I saved them, and I should be there...in Konoha. With Itachi and…" Izuna dies off. He doesn't know how to end that thought.

Kurama doesn't stop him. He's eerie when he's not yelling. Izuna would prefer it if he was yelling. "What you've done was necessary."

"I once thought killing all the kage was necessary."

Kurama shrugs one shoulder, accidentally stirring Fuu a bit. She doesn't wake. Izuna would prefer it if she did just to get out of this conversation. "I'm not the best thing to be having this moral conversation with. I don't fucking control you, Izuna. You can go where you want as long as you're not in my way."

"You've made this a lot harder for me as well."

A cold nothing ensues. Kurama looks ahead just as the sunrise starts painting the sky a bloody red. Izuna wishes his sharingan was a sunrise red, soft and pink around the edges, golds and yellows and blues all fading into each other. Neither of them were a sunrise. They were blood, they were death, they were red moons and night skies. "You want it all," Kurama finally says. "But you made your choice." Kurama looks at Naruto, then him.

"I didn't *want* to pick a side, damnit," Izuna hisses, "I wanted to stay neutral. I wanted to help you *and* Konoha. And now look at the mess you've put me in! Konoha will never trust me! *Kakashi* will never trust me again. If they put a bounty on me, it'll restrict my freedom. Just like before."

Kurama looks conflicted. He opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, then goes quiet. It's a pensive kind of silence that Izuna's never seen on Kurama's face before. Izuna scoffs, he looks away. "I'll never be able to see my clan unless its across a fucking battlefield," Izuna whispers. There's a certain numb realization that comes with his words. It only *really* hits him when he says it. The ice had nothing on the coldness that creeps through Izuna's veins. "I should have gone to them from the start. I should have gone to Naruto from the start. Instead I killed Danzo and ran away. How typical of me." He smiles bitterly. The same mistakes, over and over. How many times will it take for Izuna to learn his lesson?

"Your sense of righteousness is so fucked up," Kurama barks a laugh. "Kill one man, wipe the memory of another, only one of these is bad and its not the murder!"

Izuna relents. "Okay, but Danzo had it coming. Kakashi...he's just trying to do his best like the rest of us fools."

Kurama shrugs again, looking as carefree as a chakra monster could. "That brat's too loyal for his own good. Keeps his head down like a good little dog. Follows the rules."

"Those who break the rules are scum, but those who abandon their friends are worse than scum," Izuna mutters.

"Oh, this Kakashi really got you huh?" He breaks down into hysterics. Izuna pointedly ignores him. "Well if that bastard thinks the same of you, then maybe your fucked situation is salvageable. I mean, your Kakashi sensei made up with Obito, and he helped destroy the world!"

“Obito didn’t *know* that. Am I supposed to claim ignorance to you yoinking Naruto and then running off? That’s absurd and he won’t believe me. He knew Obito way longer, Obito *gave* him that sharingan, if you haven’t remembered correctly. All I’ve done is promise to return to Konoha and teach him how to use the sharingan properly. And then I betrayed him, stole a memory, and vanished!”

“You also returned him safely into the waiting hands of the red eyed freak clan, and coerced me into healing him, which you absolutely owe me, by the way.”

Izuna refrains from reaching out to trip Kurama. The only thing stopping him is Fuu sleeping peacefully on his back. *“I’m* part of that freak clan, you moron… and you were going to leave him to die.” *How do I reach him? How do I say I’m sorry?* It’s never been him reaching for a bond that’s been strained. He’s only chased after hatred and nothing more.

“You are one dramatic bastard. Are you gonna wallow in your own pity, or are you gonna do something about this?”

Izuna bites back a scathing reply. There’s a fire kicking up in his lungs and he has to *do* something about it. His thoughts race. He has to fix this. Take the first step.

“And he would not have died,” Kurama says pointedly, “Your brother and cousin have been hounding my heels since Konoha. You were there, it took them less than thirty minutes to find that spot.”

“Thirty minutes is a long time to be out in Frost while unconscious.”

Kurama waves him off flippantly. “You humans are so fragile.”

“You better get used to it, you’re human too, or did you forget? Uzumaki hair. Uzumaki Blood. Uzumaki bones.” *Kyuubi Eyes.* “You have limits now, just like every other human.” It’s unsaid, but Kurama gets it, as he narrows a glare in Izuna’s direction. *You could die, just like any other human.*

“Death means nothing to a bijuu,” Kurama reminds him, he grows sullen, like clouds passing over the sun. “When this body dies, I’ll sleep for a few years then return again, as fire and hate and chakra. As that self again, without all this *Uzumaki,”* He frowns, bothered. “I’ll have my memories and nothing more.”

Izuna doesn’t say anything, Kurama looks like he’s not done talking. He looks to the sun, the waking sky reflecting in his eyes. Perhaps Kurama was not the night sky that Izuna had first seen him as. Perhaps his red was not Izuna’s. Not blood. Not sharingan red in that fox’s eye. He doesn’t see Naruto, or himself. He sees Kurama. He sees the sunrise. *What are you going to do about this, Izuna?* The sunrise says.

Kurama grins in a way only a fox can. “I have no plans to die, Izuna Uchiha. What about you?”

Chapter End Notes

I am absolutely failing my summer classes at this point but fuck it, fanfic comes first (DO NOT TAKE MY ADVISE) I literally use this fic as a means of false productivity to ignore my problems and relieve my anxiety as to not deal with anything that has real consequences in my life lmao? I'm sure a lot of people do the same, hoorah for escapism!!

Anyway, I'm really hammering in those sun and moon metaphors, godbless. The Chapter title is absolutely not from Romeo and Juliet by the way. No. Definitely not.

(but I mean, they're traveling east, its a sunrise, sunrises are red...its all there c'mon)

I hope I was clear in the fact that sunrises are supposed to mean change, new starts, and garbage like that! And since Izuna has always seen himself as the moon, perhaps he'll finally change that way of thinking as well. Bitch has got to take the first step in these relationships he's building if he wants to keep them, goddamnit!

When I said ambiguous relationships I fUCKin MEANT that shit ahahahaha

What's your favorite chapter title? I'm curious to know. I liked "motion picture interludes" idk, sounds liminal to me.

One Step at a Time

Chapter Notes

ITS THE SCROLL BITCHES.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi stares down at the intricate patterns glittering on the scroll's surface. He could feel Shisui's eyes drilling into the side of his head. Itachi was being a little more discreet about his interest, but it was clear that he was as curious as his cousin. Karasu stares at him unblinkingly, taking it all in. All of Izuna's foxes, despite their childlike playfulness, had sharp eyes and keen senses. No doubt Karasu's eyes were the sharpest, and his senses the keenest.

He thought briefly about how to trick the fox, how to let Shisui and Itachi read the scroll. But in reality, the vagueness of the warning left everything in Kakashi's control. If it was Izuna who'd written this, then he no doubt knew that Kakashi could easily copy his words onto a different paper and have them read that. Or he could just read it out loud.

The indication was clear. Whoever had written this expected Kakashi to keep at least some of the information to himself. Stubbornly, Kakashi resolves to do no such thing. He was among comrades. His *real* teammates. Whatever game Izuna had been playing with him would not work here. Still, there were thorns whenever he thought about the times Izuna would actually kind of laugh at his terrible jokes, or when they ate in silence on the road, or when Izuna hung Fuu in the tree. It reminded him so much of Obito and Minato sensei.

He betrayed me. He looked me in the eyes and put me in a genjutsu. And what had Kakashi seen there? Nothing. Izuna's genjutsu wasn't anything of the sort. He simply made him black out. And that was strangely humane for someone who drove his sword straight through a man's eyeball. *And what had that man said? What did he shout that caused Izuna to act?* For the life of him, Kakashi couldn't recall, and that worried him. It was like the memory was fuzzy and distorted.

With that in mind, Kakashi's resolve solidifies. He didn't care about what Izuna wanted to say to *him,* directly. What he cares about is Konoha. What he cares about is Naruto. So he rips open the scroll with his mind full of hate. He opens his mouth to read it, to see what bullshit Izuna or the red man were feeding them this time.

"Kakashi," He reads his own name, sees Itachi and Shisui tense with anticipation, excitement, curiosity. They wanted to know about their mystery clansmen. "The-" Kakashi reads faster than his mouth can follow, and he stops abruptly. He holds the scroll closer, hiding his face, his eyes, from the prying gaze of his teammates.

This bastard.

The bells were the last addition to my katana.

Ok, Izuna, relax, no need to sucker punch him in the throat. Izuna's lettering is tall and formal. To the point. They're neat, orderly, with a curl at the end of some letters. They looked like Itachi's letters. Like Fugaku's. Like Mikoto's. Like an Uchiha. Izuna's words were waves, and Kakashi's resolve was nothing but a castle of sand.

They weren't so much a gift, but when my sensei was killed my teammates decided I should have them. Because I was the one who would often forget what it means to be on a team. When we were first tested, none of us worked together, and none of us got a bell. My two teammates were tested again, and both got their bell. But I wasn't there at the time. And I never got the chance.

It's more information than the amount Kakashi has gotten directly from him in those weeks traveling together. And it hurt just to read because of how eerily similar it was to Kakashi's own genin team. *And who in the hell was his sensei?* He knew the bell test wasn't a Minato sensei exclusive, but still. What were the odds?

I don't wish to forget again what it's like to have teammates and friends, nor do I wish to be your or Konoha's enemy. I thought we could be friends. For a second, I thought I could go to Konoha and be a part of a clan again. If that can't happen, then I understand. I betrayed you, didn't I? For what it's worth, and I guess it's not a lot coming from a liar like me, I am sorry I knocked you out. I'm sorry it had to come to this.

I withheld the truth because I thought it would be better if you didn't know. Maybe it was, maybe not. I don't know these things. I've seen the horrors of what lies and misinformation gets you, and yet here I am. Lying. Misleading. Doing the same thing I've always done and try to call it atonement.

Kakashi wants to fault him on this logic, but he can't. Not when Izuna and him had just met, and not when he was right. Kakashi knowing would have made him the biggest liability if they'd been caught. It would put Konoha and Taki in direct conflict. In keeping information to himself, Izuna claimed full responsibility for his actions. Even Kakashi can see that, despite the evil twist of bitterness somewhere deep and buried in his gut.

Sometimes I hate this world so much that I'd rather watch it burn all over again than to see it saved. Sometimes I think it'd be so much easier, if I let it dissolve into nothing but a bad dream. But I won't, because the one person I loved also loved this world. He had a tendency to never give up on anything. So even when we had a chance to run away and never fight again, he chose to turn around and rush towards the battle. And he sacrificed his life to get me here, when it should have been him.

Oh. Kakashi pauses. He's flooded with the memory of *that day.* Of Rin getting captured, of Them in the cave, the falling rocks, the smell of dust and blood. The crisp, clear image of Obito under the rock that was forever burned into his mind because the sharingan will never never let him forget it. *It should have been me under that rock. Obito would actually know how to live in this world. I just...can't.*

Izuna was a walking coincidence that seemed intent on making Kakashi's life as confusing as possible.

If it were him,

If it were Obito,

-then this mess might never have happened. He knew how to talk to people, and he knew how to make people believe in him. He inspired hope and love, while all I've ever done is make people bleed. Make people distrust me because I'm naturally distrustful, make people hate me. And I can't blame them, because I'm aggravating and arrogant and I may have some of the best eyes in the world and yet to most things I'm blind. So I'm not like him, and I can't be like him. And I can't hate the world he loved so much, even when I want to be selfish. All I can do is protect his dreams now, one step at a time.

There is no logic in dumping all this personal information into a letter addressed to a supposed enemy shinobi. That's probably because it's *not* logical. Unless, that is, he's lying. But though Izuna calls himself a liar, he never does. He gives small half truths and avoids answers. Now, he's answering the very specific questions Kakashi had asked him. Would he lie about it? Kakashi can understand it though. There's a certain appeal to wanting to spill your heart out to literal strangers. Especially if what he says is true, then Izuna is incredibly lonely.

Though, Kakashi thinks back to that fight in the snow. The claws that felt like fire raking through his flesh. Bright red hair, bright red eyes that barely looked at him. That man only looked for Izuna, and had shouted *something* to him that got the Uchiha to act against Kakashi, when he was otherwise frozen. For the life of him, he couldn't remember *what* it was. If Izuna had *someone,* then why try to salvage whatever little connection they had? *Why does he care so much?*

Kurama Uzumaki is a byproduct of his death, in a sense.

So that was his name...Kurama Uzumaki. His heart twists at that last name. It was basically already known. There was no way he was *not* an Uzumaki, in the same sense that there was no way Izuna was not an Uchiha. They just looked the part almost *too* well. But also, what the fuck did that *mean?*

The jinchuuriki are like his brothers and sisters, and are the only thing left in this world that he is willing to protect. And yes, that is what he's doing. Protecting them even from their own villages. He knows how Konoha and the rest of the countries treat their jinchuuriki—with fear and hate and disgust. And too many people have been lost to those things. My family was lost to the same things.

So when Naruto chose to leave Konoha, what he really chose was to be loved by a brother who wants him, to have a family that will protect him. Of course, no cut is ever clean when it comes to matters of the heart. Konoha tends to dig its claws in deep, for better or for worse. I see Naruto look over his shoulder, and I see him stare off into the snow. And he never shuts up about being Hokage, so I won't be surprised if he asks to go back.

The more he reads, the more his eyebrows creep higher and higher up under his hitai-ate. Because Kakashi gets it. He understands where—Kurama specifically—is coming from because he's seen it with his own eyes. But he's not about to side with them, because taking Naruto away from the village was wrong. Not just on a political level, but because Konoha is where Naruto belongs. And Naruto, it seems, might think so too.

And if that is to happen, then I'll bring him back.

He'd what?

And I'll protect him, from both Konoha and any other sorry bastard who wants his power.

WHAT?

There are many, many people who want a bijuu's power, and trust me when I say this; Konoha alone can't protect him. Villages can't protect their jinchuuriki without locking them in a box. So all that loneliness that Naruto has had to endure, it was for nothing. It* was *nothing.

You asked me why I hunt the people I hunt; why the Akatsuki, why Orochimaru. It's not for money. Hell, for most of them it's not even that personal. But it's not about them. It's not about me. They're all just pawns part of a larger scheme, one that's been in motion for a long, long time. One that you, unfortunately, have already played a part in.

And suddenly, all thoughts of Narutp vanish from his mind. He reads the paragraph over and over. They were only words on a page, but they ripped into his very soul, spread ice in his veins, and had his heart in a vice.

But we can talk about Akatsuki later, that is if Konoha decides to not kill us.

"Oh that sneaky bastard…" Kakashi mutters as he finishes reading the scroll. He rolls it back up and tosses it at the fox. Karasu leaps up to catch it and lands on the pads of his feet, feather light.

"What? What did he say?" Shisui pesters him.

An almost numbing calmness worms through his whole body as he slowly—very slowly—tries to process all the raw *emotion* mixed with his almost prophetic warnings about jinchuuriki and Akatsuki. *And what part did I play in the grand scheme of things?*

He puts those selfish questions aside for now. Izuna *was* right. They could talk about it *after* the more pressing matters were attended to.

Kakashi lays out all the facts and new information he has, starting with Izuna and all his emotional baggage.

Izuna lost his lover, *recently* from the sound of it.

Izuna lost his family at some point.

Izuna lost his sensei and probably had some unresolved shit with that.

Izuna is willing to return with Naruto, should Naruto wish it.

Izuna wishes, on some level, to reconnect with his clan. Given his current standing, understandable. Also given his current standing, it is also understandable why he chose Kurama over Kakashi. Izuna is one fucked up human being.

He probably hates himself too.

Add it to the list.

“Okay,” Kakashi starts, he looks between the two of them. Watches as Itachi’s head tilts and as Shisui’s black eyes flash red for just a second as the two lean closer. Itachi in particular carries himself so similar to Izuna that it’s uncanny. “Kurama Uzumaki is the name of the red man.” He starts.

He doesn’t say more for a long while.

Shisui groans and angrily. In one motion he rips his mask off and chuck it at him. Kakashi shifts his head just to the left and it whizzes through his hair to thunk on the wall. “Is that all you’re gonna tell us?! The guy’s name? It’s hardly that useful on a field mission like this.”

“Shut up, I’m thinking.” Kakashi snaps back at him. Shisui folds in on himself and grumbles some curses in his direction. “Naruto is safe. And like Itachi said earlier, he technically left on his own, right? He wasn’t forced?”

Itachi nods solemnly. “I should never have let Kurama talk, I watched the whole time and I did nothing until he called me out.”

Kakashi winced internally. The kid sounds robotic as he recounts what happened, but he was probably beating himself up over it. “Well, Izuna thinks there’s a high likelihood of Naruto asking to be brought back.” The two instantly perk up, even Karasu’s ears swivel forward like he can’t believe it either.

“Would they let him go, if he did?” Shisui asks.

Kakashi shrugs. “Izuna said he would. And he...also mentioned-” *Once, in the entire letter,* “-that he wanted to be a part of a clan again.”

The two teens side-eye each other. Shisui pokes Itachi’s side and the younger punches him hard enough that he clutches his stomach. Kakashi leans back on the wall and watches the two have a silent battle with just their eyes. Sometimes, he gives up on trying to figure out what they’re thinking, even when Shisui acts like an open book. Finally, Shisui growls out loud, “You’re the son of the head of the clan, so you should know!”

“I’m not my father. I barely know what he thinks about me, let alone some stranger he doesn’t even know about.” Itachi says calmly, with a bit of melancholy around the edges. Shisui’s mood dampens like he’d been dropped in a pile of snow.

“I, for one, am curious about him. He knows space-time ninjutsu. He can-”

“Wait, what?” Kakashi cuts him off. He does a mental rundown of every jutsu he has seen Izuna perform. But there was none that he could classify even remotely as space time.

Itachi blinks at him. “He disappeared using a vortex. It wasn’t a body flicker, we’d be able to track it if it was.”
Kakashi slumps against the wall. *He said he has secrets but seriously, just how many?! And did he deliberately hide them from me or just never used it?*

“Anything else?” Itachi pesters in that all too calm and professional tone of his.

“I think they’re waiting for Konoha to make the next move. Izuna...doesn’t want to be our enemy. I don’t know about Kurama though, he seems-”

“-volatile?” Itachi says.

“-vengeful?” Shisui says at the same time.

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

“So...would Izuna take Naruto even if Kurama didn’t want him to?” Shisui asks.

Kakashi shrugs. He looks at Karasu, as if the fox would have the answer, but even the smart fox simply tilts his head. “Whatever happens, *we* can’t make the next move. Itachi, you still haven’t sent those crows.”

“Well, I was interrupted.” Itachi glares pointedly at the fox. Karasu has the gall to smile around his scroll. “I’ll get to it, so long as that fox doesn’t try to eat them.” It’s probably the most petty thing Itachi has *ever* said. It takes them all by surprise, even Shisui looks mildly shocked. Karasu laughs. Because of course he does.

Kakashi finally lets himself breathe. He’s done his part for now. All the three of them can do in the meanwhile, as Itachi’s crows flies out the window, is wait for their next orders. He doesn’t know how he should be feeling about the whole ordeal. Should he be mad at Izuna for all that he’s done? Should he be mad at himself for turning a blind eye to Naruto’s loneliness? Should he be mad at Konoha? And if he should, how could he? Kakashi is a shinobi. He’s a tool to be wielded by his village, to defend it, to protect it, *to kill for the village, live for the village, die for the village.*

He doesn’t let his thoughts wander any farther than that. Kakashi instead forces the two exhausted teenagers to actually sleep. Because they’ve been going for far longer than they should have, and he can tell that they’re dead on their feet. He’s so certain the reason Itachi looks so dead inside is because he’s actually just sleeping with his eyes open at this point.

The two, after a while of grumbling and mild complaints from Shisui, finally settle down into a heap on the floor. Kakashi gets up from his own spot and moves to the window. Karasu also stands and moves closer to his feet, which unnerves him to hell and back. But the fox only blinks up at him with his glassy black eyes.

“Just one step at a time, huh?” Kakashi says to him, knowing damn well that he understands. And in return Karasu grins that wicked grin he’ll be seeing imprinted on the backs of his eyes for the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

So Imma be real y'all. When I wrote 'ooo he get this mysteriious scroll from Izuna' I LEGIT pulled that right from my ass, no planning whatsoever, I didn't even know WHERE to begin with this damn letter so I wrote it like six different times and FINALLY just editted it all down because, as it turns out, it's hard to write a letter as a character addressing another character, because fuck I can't even write letters to other people in real life without sounding condescending as SHIT, so to do that but as LITERAL OTHER PEOPLE??? And then people were fuckin HYPE in the comments for this and I was just like :DDDDDD 'i have nothing'

I have been putting this shit off so hard. I wrote two full chapters after this one before coming back to this and rewriting it a final time.

Lesson of the week: if you hate a chapter but it works, just move the fuck on. You've got better things to do than obsess over perfection. MOVE. ON.

ALSO I FAILED MY CLASSES LMAOOO (but thanks for all the people who wished me luck hahaha) BUT THAT'S NOT BECAUSE I WAS WRITING THIS ITS BECAUSE I CHOKED AND TOTALLY FORGOT WHEN MY FINALS WERE SO I JUST--DIDN'T DO THEM??? DO NOT BE LIKE ME IN THAT REGARD THE ADHD BRAIN GO BRRRRR

(and like this saturday I'm moving into a new apartment for college, god I hope my other roommates like anime...)

To The end of The World

Chapter Notes

Let's move along here folks. I love chapters where its just people talking the whole time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sasuke finds Naruto where he's been finding him for the past week and a half. With his face planted solidly into the wood desk crammed between bookshelves of Uzushio's vast library of seals. Between stacks of loose leaf papers—most of them nothing but ink smudges and dust at this point—scrolls tied up in pyramids, and thick tomes on the most advanced jutsus of the world, he snores as peacefully as a volcano. Sasuke studies him with the intensity of a dying star. The slight rise and fall of his broad shoulders, the nape of his neck peeking between his yellow-gold hair, which has become a fluffy mane that nearly reaches his shoulders. He watches his nose wrinkle slightly, then his features smooth out again, and Sasuke watches as a thin line of drool slowly, slowly drips onto—wait a minute.

"Oi, dobe!" Sasuke lunges forward and snatches the expanse of black fabric Naruto had been cradling under his head. Naruto wakes with a strangled gasp, then reels back enough to flop onto the floor. "Again? Seriously? How many times are you gonna drool on my cloak?" Sasuke hisses, "it's the only one like it! Not like your stupid yellow haori, I saw like ten of them folded up in that one trunk."

Naruto blinks up at him from his new spot on the cold stone, then he grins like an idiot. He starts snickering and Sasuke's heart clenches painfully. A vice that feels like clouds, feels like sunlight on his skin. "Okay, touchy, touchy," Naruto dusts off his pants as he sits back down at the desk.

Sasuke instantly notices the dark purple blotches stamped under his eyes, the weary way he tilts his head, the droop in his shoulders. He frowns. "You don't have to sleep down here too. We fixed enough of that room—"

"I know," Naruto cuts him off. Sasuke's frown turns into a petulant scowl. When Naruto catches his eye again, he laughs. Bright but hollow. "Oh, don't look at me like that," he pokes Sasuke's arms. Sasuke grips his new cloak tighter in his hands and glares down at the shimmering black fabric.

"You got hair all over it," he complains for the sake of complaining, for the sake of stalling, for not looking Naruto in his tired eyes, and seeing all the pain that lingers there. "You're shedding like a dog." He reaches up and pulls a lock of Naruto's hair, which earns him a slap to the wrist and a couple loose stands pinched between his fingers. Naruto tugs at his hands again, inviting him closer. Sasuke easily obliges. He sets the cloak down and drapes himself

over Naruto like a blanket. They settle pretty comfortably in that one rickety old chair. It's about to collapse, but both are too stupid to really consider things like consequences.

"You worry too much," Naruto mutters into his shoulder.

"I'm not the one who's hair's falling out 'cause of the stress."

Naruto laughs, Sasuke can feel it in his bones. He hugs him just a bit tighter. "-Just feels like we might be trapped here forever. No way back...no way forward."

"That's not all that bad." If we forget what's out there. If we only see what is in front of our noses. Only on Uzushio where there's sunlight, and green, and no fire or smoke-choked sky. *And Sasuke hates waiting for the inevitable, but just for a second, he thinks it's bearable. He thinks that maybe he could wait on Uzushio for a thousand years if it meant he could wait with Naruto.*

Sasuke pulls back from him just enough to look him in the eyes. Naruto inhales sharply. He's about to say something, and Sasuke has the feeling it'll sting like a slap so he cuts him off. "Naruto, I need you to listen to me," Sasuke takes a breath. Suddenly there's no oxygen in his lungs. A thousand words sit on the tip of his tongue, and he can't say any of them.

"I don't have anyone else," he starts slowly, carefully picking through the pile of tangled up thoughts racing through his head. He focuses on the now, on Naruto's bright hair and brighter eyes, on how warm it was between them, how safe he felt even with the impending doom that paints every aspect of their waking lives. "Fuck it...I don't want *anyone else, I don't* care *about anyone else, I don't care the world's burning. I've accepted that everyone's gone, that we lost...and that sounds fucking harsh but its the truth. I'm tired of fighting, and that's the truth. I only care about you, and if I'm a selfish, horrible person for it then whatever. You're it, Naruto. And I can live with that. And I know…" he stops, because Naruto's eyes shine in the dull kind of way. A threat of tears, of anger. Sadness.*

"You don't mean that," Naruto whispers. There's a lot more space between them for a second. "If we have a chance, even if its slim, even if it amounts to nothing, we owe it to everyone to-"

"Wait, listen," Sasuke grips his shoulder to keep him from slipping away. He pulls him closer, until their foreheads touch and Sasuke shuts his eyes so he can breathe better. "I know you can't live with that...with only me," Naruto starts to protest but it dies quickly when Sasuke scoffs to himself. "Don't deny it. You're different from me. There's nothing wrong with that. You're better than me." He feels a hand card through the hair on the back of his neck. He's been growing it longer. Or rather, there's no reason to cut it.

"Don't you want to save them too? Your family? All the Uchiha?" Naruto whispers, sounding like he's almost going to cry.

Sasuke doesn't know. He's never known. The more he learns about his clan, the more he wonders if he wants them back at all. "I've mourned them my entire life." He says, "I lived my entire life for them. For the clan. For Uchiha. For my brother. For revenge. If we do go back, I'll do it all again. But that's all for the future. In the past. All I want right now, in this

moment, is Naruto Uzumaki to stop worrying about what's happened and what's to come. You and I...we've been chasing all our lives. We don't know what it means to stop."

Naruto chuckles. They're so close Sasuke can feel a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, just barely grazing his cheek. "I would have chased you to the end of the world," he traces a pattern on Sasuke's shoulder, a mimic of the black ink that stains his skin. Bound for life in an unbreakable seal. Sasuke can feel it tugging at him even when Naruto is literally right there, in his arms, as close as they can be.

"Now you got me, and the world's about to end."

Sasuke leans forward, brushes their lips together and Naruto surges forward. They crash together. It's lightning and fire under Sasuke's skin. There's a squeak of old wood, a crack, and neither of them are quick enough to register that hey, maybe two people sitting on a tiny wooden chair that's probably decades old under bad conditions is a good idea. They're weightless one moment, then Naruto's back hits the ground and jolts them forward, until a kiss becomes teeth and blood and sharp white hot pain. Sasuke sits up and covers his mouth.

"Holy fuck!" Naruto gasps, he props himself up on his elbows to glare at him, a trickle of blood running down his chin. "You bit me! what the hell, Sasuke?!"

"That was not my fault dobe!"

* * *

Izuna looks out over the black water. The sea here is familiar. A journey almost a full year ago, when Naruto and him first crossed the water to Uzushio. When they had an army on their heels, and they lost them in the snows and cliffs of Frost and Lightning. Just as Kurama and him did now. Ice clung to the churning waters instead of seafoam. Sheets of small broken glaziers made a slush of the rocky beach, if it could even be called a beach. Only a few feet of sharp, flat stone separated the water from a steep cliff face, one pockmarked with cracks and caves.

They'd made camp in one of these said caves. A deep and narrow slit between two rocks that was easy to hide with an illusion barrier that made the entrance nothing but one continuous boulder. Kurama had been picking his claws and scraping the sides of the cave with his nails, causing huge gauges in the stone that were completely unnatural. Naruto was, frankly, enamoured that Kurama could do such a thing.

Fuu, on the other hand, was committed to relieving Izuna of his eyes. Her aim got more precise with every throw. Izuna contemplates whether or not to coach her on throwing speed. One day, maybe in the next few, he'll start fearing for his safety. After the disaster with Kakashi and meeting Kurama, she'd grown a little sulky. He doesn't know who she blames for the separation of her new favorite person, and that's a problem. Izuna thinks it's him, because she knows he cast the genjutsu. She refuses to let him carry her.

Izuna had no idea how to handle that. Kurama also had no idea how to handle that. They were a bundle of disasters just waiting to happen. And the sheer amount of chakra from two jinchuuriki and three bijuu, plus Izuna, was like a bomb. And Izuna had a knack for pushing Kurama's buttons as much as Kurama pushed his.

So, to say that their group had a time limit like everything else in Izuna's pathetic life, was an understatement.

"Fourteen hours," Kurama scratches down the length of the wall, leaving powdery white dust in his wake. He crushes the pile under his feet and it sets itself on fire. Izuna pokes at the fire pit in the back of the cave. Naruto is sound asleep next to him, encircled in Izuna's skulk of foxes. Aka's head rests protectively over the boy's shoulder. Izuna had given up his cloak to act as a barrier between the ground and him. Naruto's head of blond hair barely pokes out between mounds of fur and black fabric. Fuu was up, throwing three kunai simultaneously at a thick piece of driftwood Kurama had dragged in earlier like a smug cat. "They have to be fucking us in the ass by now."

Fuu snorts. Izuna glares at him. "Don't say shit like that-"

"-You're no better!"

"-I sent the scroll with Karasu. It'll stall them long enough." And like the sea, his insides churn dark and cold when he thinks about that stupid scroll.

"You really trust him?" Kurama wanders over and crouches on the opposite side of the fire. He stares at Izuna unblinkingly. *He's antagonizing as all hell.* He's tempted to flare his sharingan, because he knows Kurama hates it very much. He'd look away for sure.

Instead Izuna shrugs, "I trust his curiosity." He wrings his hands together. He can't get his foot to stop tapping. Did he write the right things? Did he sound sincere? Did he just fuck up so badly that he can't recover? Dealing with people fucking sucked. And because the only two successful relationships he's ever had in his life were Itachi and Naruto, well, he was used to endless forgiveness. He remembers Kakashi. He remembers that at some point, Kakashi also snapped at him, saw him as the real threat he was. This Kakashi would be no different. He'd be worse, actually. And it's not like a student asking his sensei for forgiveness. It's not like Izuna's the kid and Kakashi is the adult. He and Kakashi are equals in this world, and that is terrifying.

Kurama raises a single eyebrow, then he groans dramatically. "What? Did you write him a fucking love letter?" Then he cackles like any demon should and Izuna can't tell if he's joking or not.

Either way, he does not dignify him with a response. He turns to smother their fire with dust and rocks. Ugh. *Feelings.* Even the non-romantic kind wants to make him vomit. He basically dumped all his trauma on him and wasn't there for the repercussions of it. Typical of him, really.

He's distracted from his inner turmoil when Naruto blinks up at them from his pile of red and orange and white. Mimi pops his head up and yawns wide. He flicks his damaged ear and

stands up to bite at Izuna's sleeve. This, he can deal with. His foxes were simple. They liked food, they liked playing, and they liked Izuna. That was all that mattered to them.

Kurama doesn't miss any of it. He doesn't say another word to Izuna. And despite the demon being expressive as all hell, Izuna could not begin to discern what he was thinking at that moment.

"I'm good to go anytime." Kurama says instead of anything relating to foxes or kids or Kakashi and love letters.

"When was the last time you ate anything?' Izuna says as he digs through his storage scrolls for all the dried meat he keeps for emergencies—or fox treats. He tears a chunk off for himself then tosses a bit into Aka's open mouth.

Kurama frowns. Izuna stops. "You've...eaten something, right? Since we've gotten here?"

"Yes of course I have!" Kurama snaps. "I get hungry, same as you!"

Izuna scoffs at him. *What an idiot.* "And Naruto? What has he eaten?"

Kurama growls. "I bought some salted fish and instant food from Steam country. I can last a few days but he's *Naruto,* he'll never shut up about food in this life or the last."

Izuna takes a moment to unpack all of that. On one hand, it wasn't the worst, on the other hand, it was totally the worst, and also—"Where did you get the money?"

Kurama does not answer. Izuna shuts his eyes briefly and inhales until he can feel the chill in his lungs. *Just breathe, Izuna.* "Okay, whatever. Eat now before we go." He divides the rest of his rations between all of them. It's not long before Naruto's fully awake to ask for ramen, *real* ramen at that.

"We shouldn't go exclusively by sea." Izuna says. "We don't have a boat. You were planning on running all the way there, weren't you?"

Kurama scowls. "I already changed our course to accommodate the foxes," he says. "Instead of going exclusively by sea, we can make a direct shot to Uzushio from here. We'll be traveling by sea for a few days, then stop again in Steam Country," He draws a crude map with a claw. Izuna could almost be impressed that Kurama had enough sense to memorize, well, anything really. "Steam kind of pokes out, so it's not a detour. In fact, it's faster, but riskier because we'll be on the mainland. Kinda feels like we're backtracking, but since we've lost the sharingan clan, it'll be hard for them to find us." He reaches over and ruffles Naruto's hair. "We can stop and eat ramen in Steam country."

"Ooo, I want to eat ramen in every country!" Naruto leaps to his feet at his declaration.

"That sounds like a good goal," Izuna chuckles. Naruto beams at him. He smiles back. It's not hard. It hurts like a dull ache. It hurts more to look at Kurama, to look at how Naruto ended up in his time. "I wouldn't mind traveling, when I'm done with my mission."

“Do you have a secret anbu mission like the masked people that followed me?” Naruto asks innocently, all too brightly.

“Well...I’m not an anbu, but my mission could be similar in terms of difficulty, maybe even more so.”

“So you’re like, ridiculously strong? Can you fight a kage?!” Naruto grabs onto his hand and practically vibrates at the thought.

Fuu is suddenly there. “He beat an assassin trying to kill me. The guy had a massive sword, and he could turn himself into water.”

Kurama’s eye twitches at that. “You didn’t tell me. Akatsuki?”

“Hn...about a week after I got the news of Kiri. The sword…It’s kubikiribocho.” Kurama tilts his head slightly. His red eyes narrow. Izuna levels him with a flat look. “Zabuza Momochi? Haku? Wave country? Bridge?”

Kurama scoffs, “Oh yeah I remember that. That’s when I first *really* woke up, *ha!”* Kurama shakes his head. He smiles like he’s lost in the memory. Izuna knows that feeling well, it’s been haunting him for the weeks he traveled with Kakashi. “I woke up because he thought you fucking died.”

Izuna cringes internally. “Don’t remind me.”

“Oh, it was *funny,* don’t deny that! *”* Kurama laughs, evil and dark and showing all his pearly white fangs. Because despite the *fluff* about him, the way he cards his claws gently through Naruto’s hair, or squats down to rub noses with Aka and Karasu, or all his talk of friendship and love, Kurama is still the kyuubi. Still a demon in a human’s body, still himself, irrevocably.

Naruto and Fuu stare at the two of them, eating up all the little bits of information they can.

“Let’s just...go.” Izuna stands. His foxes leap up around him and he finally retrieves his cloak from the ground. The black is more of a gray and orange patchwork at this point, smothered in both dust and fox fur. He sees a couple strands of Naruto’s gold-blond tangled in there as well. While Kurama calls the foxes over to him to start distributing chakra—wrapped in gold and white light and glowing just as Naruto would—Izuna fiddles with the torn edges of his cloak. He wants a new one, but he likes this one too much to just get rid of it.

He wonders briefly if he’ll find the exact one where he found it last time, buried in the back of a dilapidated clothing store. It was the only black thing in there. The rest were bright blues and greens and vibrant sunset colors.

“How’s Gaara, without you there?” Izuna throws the ratty cloak over his shoulders. Hokori finds his way to his shoulders, while Kurome decides Naruto is a much better seat.

“He and Yugito keep each other company,” Kurama answers immediately.

“And how old is Yugito?”

Kurama looks up at him from between his mane of hair. There's a challenge in his gaze, one that Izuna meets without hesitation. "She's thirteen."

"So you left a seven year old with a barely teenager."

"I'm not going to remind you what thirteen year olds can do, I'm sure you can figure that out on your own."

Izuna bristles. "Killing people and taking care of them are two different things!"

"And yet your brother did both before he was Yugito's age. She can handle it."

Izuna gapes at Kurama. He vaguely hears Fuu and Naruto gasp in surprise. He trembles on the spot, a bottomless pit of fire opening up just under his lungs. His sharingan spins to life for a moment, a moment where he grips the hilt of his katana until his knuckles turn white. Kurama's mane of hair poofs. "That's cruel. Even for you, Kurama." Izuna flicks his attention to the kids huddled around his foxes. Their wide eyes glitter. Fuu had her kunai ready, with one arm around Naruto's shoulders like she would protect him. They both startle when he looks at them.

Fear in their eyes.

He deactivates his sharingan and sweeps out of the cave. Guilt churns in his stomach. "Nevermind. We should hurry before Konoha makes their move."

Chapter End Notes

So I moved in and got through my first week of the new semester! Today in itself was kind of shit but editing and posting this chapter really helped bring my spirits back up. And oh god do I suck at writing kiss scenes so how do we cope with that? We make it funny!!

I don't really have any notes about the actual chapter huhu

Also I cried bc one of my favorite content creators announced they had cancer and then I felt like an idiot bc what right do I have to cry about some random person that doesn't know me and I don't really know them besides their content?? But also it reminded me of one of my irl friend who actually did have cancer when we were young so then I was just in a horrible self loathing bubble and once I cried my eyes out I decided it was the perfect time to finish this chapter.

On a happier note, my video game class assigns playing video games as legit homework haha.

Eyes of Crimson Dissonance

Chapter Notes

Ooop here we go--

y'know Izuna/Sasuke is the main character but I went through all my chapters again and he's only the POV like every other?? I need more sasuke content in my fucking sasuke centric fic??? wtf??

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the duration of their race across the waves, Izuna is Naruto's designated chauffeur as opposed to Kurama. He suspects it's because Fuu is heavier and Kurama's trying to play nice by delegating less strain to him and his—regrettably—inferior chakra pool. But whatever. It led to Naruto chatting in his ears for hours on end about little things in Konoha that weren't *so* horrible. Like a masked man giving him a stuffed dog—Izuna suspects it was either Kakashi or Shisui—or Ichiraku ramen. He talks about how Iruka-sensei would yell at him in class but take him aside to help him through the worst of his failures. He talks about the Hokage, and all the mischief he'd get up to, and how he learned to hide from the masked shinobi in the trees.

And then he talked about Sasuke. A boy who always sat on the edge of the pier overlooking the large lake, just outside the Uchiha compound. They never talked, but Naruto lamented the fact that he was better at everything than him, and that everyone was always looking at him.

"They all talk about *Sasuke, Sasuke,"* Naruto rambles on, "oh *he's so good at shuriken, oh he's so cute, oh he'll be a fantastic shinobi, oh he's so smart."* He imitates a girl's voice. "What's so good about Sasuke anyway…he has a stupid haircut..." Izuna smiles, despite the lump in his throat.

"And what bothers me the most is that he has all this attention! And he just...ignores them! Like he's better than us!"

Izuna's smile slips right off his face. "Maybe he doesn't like people," he offers.

Naruto scoffs. "I'd do anything for a little piece of that."

"You have a little piece of that now." Izuna reminds him, which immediately perks the kid up again.

"Right! I have Kurama and Fuu and you now! And all your pretty foxes!" Naruto hugs him around the neck. "But sometimes...I think about Iruka-sensei, and Hokage-gigi, and Ichiraku

Ramen. I miss them."

"Do you miss Sasuke and his stupid haircut?"

Naruto doesn't answer, but the back of his neck is headbutted suddenly. Izuna doesn't push it. He shouldn't meddle with that. *How did it take us so long to figure it out? Bound by fate, Bound by souls. Bound by every force in the universe, pulling us together and it took too long to get us there. Standing hand in hand.*

But right about this time was when it all happened. When the massacre happened, Sasuke was at his peak of despondency before his defection. He remembers this little friendship happening, and then it didn't matter anymore. In a blink of an eye, he had forgotten all about Naruto coming around the lake. Because things like friendship meant nothing to him back then. All he cared about was Itachi, was killing him, was wallowing in his grief until it consumed him. And now...Now it was Naruto leaving.

Leaving for all the right reasons.

When they finally stop, it's just on the outskirts of a large, bustling civilian village in Steam Country. The village sat in a crescent moon bay—surrounded by icy, low sloping hills—with three long piers and a small fleet of ships coming and going. The sun was nearly setting, and lanterns were being lit. The streets glowed a warm orange. A stark contrast to the cool chill of snow topped roofs and the black water of the bay.

It was their second day of travel and Izuna was about to drop dead on his feet from chakra exhaustion. Kurama had graciously lent him just a bit of his kyuubi chakra. Some time along the way, Chomei had to save Fuu from dropping into the water.

Izuna leads their group to the rocky beach, where they quickly dispel all of Kurama's glowing chakra to appear as normal as possible. Which, with five red foxes dancing at their heels, was nearly impossible. Izuna would suggest a henge, but neither of them want to go through the effort of wasting more chakra. So they go as is. Kurama tells Naruto and Fuu to stay as close as possible, with Naruto easily latching onto Kurama's hand. Fuu takes up her usual position of trailing behind Izuna, just within his peripherals.

The village is lively and bustling with a plethora of street vendors selling mouth watering foods. They walk through a fish market that has his foxes drooling and slowly, slowly getting further and further away from him. Right when they're about to leave that street behind, he spies Tama and Mimi trying to slink away from the pack, and he scruffs them both immediately. It earns him a copious amount of annoyed whines and droopy tails.

Aka keeps them wrangled in from then on, including Fuu, who flits around to several food stalls and is almost pressured into buying a silk scarf from a shady trinkets dealer.

Miraculously, Naruto finds them a ramen stand within ten minutes, claiming he followed his nose, and they all pile into the small bartop counter. Aka and the gang fit themselves between their stools as they sit, much to everyone's despair. Izuna gets a dozen side-eye looks, and Kurama gets a dozen more for entirely different reasons.

“Get as much as you want,” Izuna tells them, he glares at Kurama, “Unlike someone, I have funds.”

Kurama shoves him so hard he nearly topples to the ground.

Fuu and Naruto stand up on their stools and wave down the owner, both ordering massive amounts of tonkatsu pork ramen—five bowls between them with all the fixings and sides of fried shrimp. Izuna himself gets miso ramen. Kurama looks at all of them without a thought behind his eyes. He eventually orders what Naruto and Fuu were eating, and starts picking at it.

Izuna, on the other hand, slurps down his noodles with the grace of one of his foxes. For a second, he completely forgets himself and starts devouring his food. He hasn’t stopped to eat anything *real* in a long, *long* time. He feeds bits of pork and fish to Hokori, whose head pops out just below Izuna’s chin. He’s half way through his first bowl when he notices Naruto, of all the people there, is staring off into nothingness. He rocks a bit on his stool, and swivels his head to stare out at the people passing by. Izuna catches those blue eyes tracing every one, but not in the way a shinobi watches for danger, or how a predator watches prey.

He watches them with something Izuna saw for months on Uzushio. In the eyes of *his* Naruto. A deep, nostalgic melancholy. A pin prick of dread starts to work through his gut. Izuna loses his ravenous appetite immediately.

“Something wrong?” He whispers to Naruto, trying to keep Kurama and Fuu away from the conversation. Naruto does a double take. That blank sadness is buried under a bright smile. It’s still there. Naruto was young and naive in many things, but crafting a mask was not one of them. If Izuna wasn’t who he was, and didn't know what he knew about Naruto, then that mask would have fooled him. It *did* fool him for years when he thought Naruto as nothing but a loudmouth idiot.

“Nothing! I was thinking about Ichiraku again. This ramen is this *close* to being as good,” he pinches his finger and thumb together, “but I think I like ichiraku better.”

“Hn…” Izuna doesn’t beat around the bush.“You miss it. Don’t you?”

“Huh?!” Naruto sputters. Izuna doesn’t let up. Naruto settles down into his famous pout. “Who cares if I miss some stupid ramen stand. I have Kurama and you and Fuu and...and all your foxes,” Izuna knows what’s about to happen, but knowing it and reacting to it were two very different things. “And Kurama says that there’s more kids like me on Uzushio....” When the first tear drops, all his muscles refuse to move. He can do nothing, only stare as Naruto starts to cry. “that’s more precious people than I’ve *ever* had. So...so *who cares about ramen?”*

Fuu glances over her shoulder at them, but before she can open her mouth, Izuna shoots her a death glare that has her backing off. She takes up Kurama’s attention as well, because she’s just that good.

Izuna forces himself to move. He gently puts his hand on Naruto’s head. “It’s never just about the ramen.”

Naruto balls his fists and rubs it on his face aggressively, until his cheeks are red and blotchy. With his free hand, Izuna carefully stops him from scratching himself. He hunches down to get at Naruto's level. "You look over your shoulder when no one is there. You stare off into this sea of people. And you see faces of the few people you know. You miss Konoha."

Naruto whimpers, then lets out a shaky breath. "I should hate Konoha. And I know why they hate me. Kurama told me it's because I'm the kyuubi jinchuuriki, and they're scared of me. Kurama hates them, so shouldn't I hate them?"

Izuna's heart thrums in his throat. *What the hell Kurama?!* His first thought is to immediately reprimand Kurama for instilling that kind of thinking into Naruto. His second is to lament about his own hatred, because he loves doing that. But instead, he takes a second to shut his eyes and *think.* What does Naruto need right now?

"Naruto...you are not Kurama." *You are not the demon inside you.* "You are Naruto Uzumaki, not Kurama. And if you don't hate Konoha, then you don't." Izuna smiles at him. Naruto lifts his head a little. "You are truly kind, and selfless. Never think that needs to change." Naruto lifts his head, Izuna pulls his hand back, and watches blue eyes go cross eyed trying to follow his fingers. He pokes Naruto's forehead. "You're better than us in that regard."

Naruto slaps a hand on his forehead indignantly, or as much indignity a seven year old can muster. "Of course I'm better than you! I'm Naruto Uzumaki after all!" He puffs out his chest and laughs like a fox. "I'll be the greatest ninja to ever live, believe it!"

"I do. I believe it." Izuna says. Naruto's eyes glitter. "If you want to be true greatness, then you should really be able to dodge me," Izuna says, and pokes his forehead again.

"What was that for?!" Naruto shouts, Izuna laughs at him, and the melancholy is officially over. He starts vehemently attacking Izuna with his tiny fists while Izuna pokes his forehead repeatedly. Soon after, one of Fuu's kunai gets thrown into the cat fight. Things get a bit more deadly as he dodges small hands that pull his cloak and tug his hair, and a razor sharp blade that has a liking for his eyes.

Silently, as they finish their meals, Izuna vows to watch him more closely, to make sure that Uzushio and Kurama were the right place for him. That he could leave Konoha with confidence in that decision. That he won't regret like Izuna.

Like Sasuke.

They finish their ramen and head further into town. Izuna leads them through the crowds, his presence making the people around them part like water. He gets too many stares for his liking, too many hungry eyes, mouths whispering, birds flying. It won't take more than a day for Konoha to catch wind of where they were. But Izuna was determined to actually get sleep. The kids, despite their cheer, were exhausted. Sleeping while Izuna and Kurama ran across the sea was not ideal.

They find an inn on the outskirts of town, connected to one of Steam Country's numerous hot springs. Fuu practically squeals in excitement at the thought of taking a hot bath. Izuna contemplates on two rooms, but then Naruto complains that he wants to dogpile with the

foxes, and the foxes stick to Izuna. Then Kurama growls about not leaving the kids unattended on their own, so they end up in one big room.

Kurama and Izuna set up a barrier around them so only their four chakra signatures and the seven foxes can enter, then Izuna puts up standard silencing seals. He falls into habits he'd rather forget. It's almost been a year since he's been actively hunted, but now that paranoia starts settling in his bones. Izuna exits through their one window and scouts out a perimeter of a mile. He checks every upturned stone and winding narrow paths that lead farther into the mainland. He pushes his senses as far as they can go—which wasn't as far as Kakashi or Kurama, but still good enough. Only then does he feel comfortable enough to return and settle down for the night.

At first, he wants to clear out his arsenal, take stock of his supplies, and polish his sword, but a heavy exhaustion starts to drag his eyes down. Kurama refuses to let him have the first watch, so he drifts off into a light sleep, which deepens when Naruto and Fuu start using his right arm as a pillow, and Tama decides his chest is the perfect place to curl up.

He gets five hours. Rare, for someone on the run, and then Kurama wakes him for the second watch. When he stirs, Tama licks his nose and stands on his ribs with enough force to push all the air from his lungs. He shoves the fox off him, then carefully extracts his arm from under Naruto and Fuu's heads.

Kurama blinks at him, red eyes glowing in the almost pitch darkness of their room. He looks like a predator crouched on the window sill, completely still save for when he swivels his head to watch Izuna slowly rise, slowly gather his things, and slowly pad over to him.

"See anything?"

"Karasu is close," Kurama tilts his head up, Izuna follows his gaze, to the sliver of a silver moon peaking between charcoal grey clouds. "I sensed him a few seconds ago, but he's gone out of range again."

Izuna's stomach swoops. He knows what that means. An answer. *Would Kakashi write to him as Kakashi, or as Konoha?* "Get some sleep, I'll find him."

Kurama scoffs, but he slinks down from the sill with silent precision. The terrifying nature of Kurama, when he's not acting feral or brash, is one of burning cold power. Nothing shows it more than sunrise red eyes in the inky dark of night. When he passes by Izuna's shoulder, he pauses.

"Do you think, one day, that you'll stop seeing him?" Kurama asks, strangely vulnerable and quiet.. He doesn't need to elaborate. Izuna knows, and he stands there with his mouth half open, trying to think of words but all that comes to mind are a collage of different red eyes and different blue eyes. When he's silent for much too long, Kurama snorts and turns away.

"Not with my eyes," Izuna whispers. He doesn't know if Kurama hears him as he takes the spot Izuna had been occupying. Naruto's drowsy eyes blink open for a second, and when he notices a very different head of red hair, he latches on to Kurama's arm like he'd disappear

any second. Izuna assumes his position at the window and watches as the three slowly settle back down again.

As Izuna leaps up out the window and flips onto the roof, he's still thinking about it. He wonders when Kurama will ever only be Kurama to him. Maybe never. He doesn't know. Because he sees sunrise red eyes and red hair and he still thinks of his Naruto. His Naruto, who he had watched turn into those reds. He can't forget it. Not with a sharingan. And despite Kurama being so callous towards this particular matter, it's almost painfully obvious that it bothers him. A lot, in fact.

Izuna buries those thoughts again and focuses on the task at hand. He flares his chakra out, but can't sense anything within his own range. He starts running out into the surrounding area. He goes farther into the village first, using a long line of rooftops to get from their natural spring inn to the market streets. He takes a few running leaps to get to the top of a five story building, then waits.

The sky flickers black, silver, then purple. Fire dances down from the clouds as Karasu swirls in the sky, and Izuna's suspicions are finally confirmed. He grins as the sky parts and lightning lights up the silhouettes of two animals. Karasu does a final flip and lands as light as a feather right next to him.

In his mouth is a small, thin scroll, forest green and entirely plain. When Izuna holds his hand out, he half expects Karasu to turn away from him and look for Kurama, but the fox hands it over without complaints. Izuna pretends he doesn't feel the pair of eyes on him watching from entirely too close.

He's been waiting far too long to see one of these, and now that he has he can't get enough of it. He bides his time, picking at the paper seal on the scroll, watching the moon, scratching Karasu's belly and playing with his two tails. After a while, when Izuna can't keep the smirk off his face, he says to the open air, "The moon's almost full, isn't it?"

He sighs, hears the slight ruffle of wings, the tap of small clawed feet on stone, and then the chittering city quiet that's never really silent. There's a pause, the flutter of feathers, and Izuna sees black wings and red, moon reflected eyes on the edge of his vision. He tucks the scroll safely into his cloak as the crow hops forward, cover blown and looking pissed that it was discovered so early. Izuna lets out a throaty laugh that's entirely not like him.

"Hello, Uchiha," Izuna says. He doesn't look into the bird's eye. Not yet. It's little head tilts. Izuna holds out his arm, willing it to hop on. The crow dignifies itself by staying firmly on the roof. It gets within three feet of him, then stops. "So? Are you here to talk, or are you gonna stalk me until the end of time?"

The crow caws once. Izuna does not know what it means. Karsu looks at it, then crouches like he's about to pounce. Izuna grips a handful of his scruff fur to keep him in place. "Don't mind him. I told him it's okay to let one of you follow."

The crow caws again, this time Izuna can clearly understand its indignation. "If you want to have a conversation, you'll have to look me in the eyes," The crow points its beak down. *No.* "It's trust on both sides." Izuna pulls his tanto half-way out of its sheath. "Or I could kill you

now, if you prefer?" The crows squawks and flutters away from him. Izuna laughs again. He motions the bird forward with his two fingers, the same exact gesture Itachi would do to him. Like he suspects, it piques the bird's interest, and it scurries back to his side. "Look at me, Uchiha," Izuna says, and finally, the crow catches his eyes.

The sharingan spins, and the world collapses around them. It reconstructs into a black void filled with ankle deep water. Around them, the water turns to black pebbly beach, with quiet, gentle waves lapping at a shore. A bright, white moon hangs low in the sky. It's Izuna's own mindscape.

The crow had shed its form, and in its place is Itachi. Young, anbu, crouching just within the water's edge, and glaring at Izuna with enough venom to rival Orochimaru's collection. He's not wearing his mask. Instead Izuna can see the beginnings of those long and deep stress lines carving through his cheeks. A face that's entirely too similar to his stares back at him. Izuna kicks some rocks in his direction, and his once brother hops backwards to avoid them.

"You're much more lively than before." Itachi says, as calm as the eye of a storm, stoic in the way that makes Izuna's heart lurch. When he saw Itachi before, he'd been a little preoccupied. He didn't have the capacity to freak out about more than one or two things at a time, and with Kakashi slung over his shoulder and Naruto just within his reach, his mind had almost completely glazed over the fact he'd *met* Itachi.

Now, without the mask, without a barrier of white porcelain, without any distractions, it all crashes into him like a hurricane. He sucks in a painful breath, the tears already threatening to spill. His throat closes, and then his lungs start to ache. He breathes out, slow and painful, but it's all trapped between his ribs, a mess of tangled emotions, poking his heart like thorns and barbed wire.

Itachi looks at him like he's a ghost. Which does nothing to enforce the distance between them. His brother is here, staring at him like he's a stranger—because that's exactly what he is—and somehow it's worse than little seven year old Naruto. It's worse than his twenty-something sensei. It's *Itachi,* looking so much like he did the night he murdered his clan. And to him, Izuna is nothing. Just a passerby with the same last name.

"You're crying-" Itachi stands, and *fuck he's shorter than me?* Itachi's head barely reaches his shoulders. Izuna scoffs at his own pathetic train of thought. He wipes his tears away messily. They were uncomfortably hot against his skin. He refuses to clear his stuffy nose, he would probably die of embarrassment—though he does remember a particularly dramatic breakdown he had in front of Kakashi. When he finally collects himself again, they both pretend like nothing happened, to Izuna's immediate relief.

"You really are an Uchiha," Itachi starts again, voice soft like he's almost in awe. "I've never seen you before."

"You didn't know I existed until I popped up in front of your face, right?" Izuna goes straight for the gut punch, and it works wonderfully. Itachi, despite always perfectly having his emotions collected, broke for just half a second, just like his crow. Indignation flashes before dissipating into a cool nothing.

“Kakashi’s mission was...classified.”

Izuna gathers all his suffocating emotions and shoves them into a box. He focuses on the other aspects of this exchange, like the bloom of pure joy slowly eating through all his shock and painful remembrance. He sits on the black pebbles, then gestures for Itachi to join him. He does, albeit with several feet between them and still sitting on the balls of his feet. “If it was really classified, he’d have gone as anbu.” Izuna says quietly, out over the rippling water. “Someone didn’t want the Uchiha to know about me. Not before they got their claws in first.”

Itachi looks from him to the darker than black horizon. “Your mind is peaceful.” He observes quietly. He completely ignores Izuna’s accusation.

“It wasn’t always.” Izuna’s mindscape had looked like black chains, like spikes and blood and a black abyss instead of a peaceful night. Sometimes he’d see dozens of sharingan eyes staring at him. Sometimes, it was an infinite tsukuyomi instead of the moon. Infact, this was only the second time he’s seen this lake and the bright full moon. “It used to be quite cluttered.”

Itachi makes a noncommittal sound.

Izuna uses his sheathed tanto to flick a rock into the water. “What was it that you were hoping to accomplish with this crow?”

Itachi sighs. He doesn’t answer. Typical. Izuna scoffs at him, earning a slightly mullish expression from his brother. *His brother who is younger. Who is shorter. Who is still probably smarter than me, if I’m being honest.* “Surveillance? Tracking? Or did you wish to speak to me? To know what I’m about *before* your hokage strips it all away.” Izuna doesn’t bother to read Itachi’s expressions any longer. He won’t get anything worthwhile.

Instead he leans back and gazes at the moon. Or, the moon his mind likes to conjure up. If he concentrates hard enough, he can change it to a crescent, like his tattoo. Itachi does not speak, as silent as the grave. So Izuna fills it in with his own questions. He wants to know this Itachi, this younger, rougher, bitter boy who Izuna was much too small to understand the first time around until it was entirely too late. “Haven’t you figured out where we’re going yet?”

“Uzushio.” Itachi says.

Izuna smiles up at the sky. He imagines stars and they start to appear in strange constellations. Itachi also looks up. “What gave us away?”

Itachi takes a while to answer. When he does, his voice is as soft as the wind. “Kurama Uzumaki. Mostly. Where else would he go?”

“Anywhere in the world.”

“Anywhere is the same as nowhere.”

Izuna tilts his head, watches Itachi do the same until black eyes meet black. In here, genjutsu is still a thing and yet neither is thrown into a surprise attack. Izuna wonders how deep a bond could run. *Could it leap through time and space? Naruto was already attached to me, but that could just be Naruto. Or the fact that the kid likes my foxes too much to be considered healthy.*

Kurama's words race through his head. "Do I look like someone you know?" He asks. On a whim really, not expectly much, because he's Uchiha through and through, so of course he looks similar to his clan. Itachi freezes all too quickly. *Can you tell who I am?* "Whatever, don't answer that." *I don't think I want to know.*

So Itachi doesn't. He asks his own question. "What's your relation to Kurama Uzumaki?"

"Is this an interrogation?" Izuna scoffs. Itachi shrugs his left shoulder just barely. His smile dies. "It's complicated."

"Most things are."

"Yeah," Izuna sighs, he circles his knees with his arms and rests his chin on top. This way, he's almost smaller than Itachi. *I want to be young again.*

When it becomes clear Izuna will not elaborate, Itachi mirrors his position. He picks up a black pebble and rolls it in his fingers, contemplating something grave behind his eyes. Izuna lets him think in silence. "You trust Kakashi."

"To an extent."

"Because he traveled with you for a few weeks?" Accusatory, in a subtle way.

Izuna's mouth quirks into a small smirk. It only lasts a second. No doubt Itachi had caught and recorded it, trying to analyse all the different things it could mean. "Because I know who he is." Izuna says eventually, and then, because it dances on the tip of his tongue and if he's learned anything from loud mouthed Uzumakis it's how to forget about tact, he says, "And I know who you are."

The reaction is immediate, but small. The slight shift in Itachi's stance. His fingers drum gently against his arms. Nothing more. Just enough for Izuna to know he's got him hooked. "How so?"

"Itachi Uchiha," Izuna starts. "But it's not like you're hidden away from the rest of the world."

"No. But I'm not famous. Not like-"

"-Copy Cat Kakashi," they say at the same time. Izuna has never been good at deciphering Itachi's limited expressions. Hell, he was notoriously bad at it. But he thinks at this moment, there's a small bud of familiarity forming. And Izuna will be damned to hell if he snaps this bond like he's so prone to doing.

"If you know me, then why not let me read the scroll?"

“Ah,” Izuna smiles, unable to help himself, “That’s caught you up?”

“No.” Itachi answers immediately, betraying his words. “It alludes to the fact that...at least some pieces of that message were strictly for Kakashi and no one else.”

Izuna chuckles to himself. “Well, you’re right. I had to make sure I had his attention after all.”

“Why?”

Izuna regards him carefully. “It wasn’t you who I looked in the eyes and betrayed.”

“Kakashi doesn’t think you betrayed him...well, not really”

Izuna scoffs. “Of course not,” Itachi stays quiet. Izuna shifts around, a bit uncomfortable under Itachi’s scrutiny. “But he’ll only forgive me so many times. He’s not-” *Not Naruto. Not you.* “-not the type.”

“And you know that because..?” Itachi raises his eyebrows, disbelieving.

Izuna grins at him, all fox-like and defensive. Itachi knows it’s fake. Izuna doesn’t care that he knows, because he clamps his tongue behind wicked teeth and upturned eyes. He doesn’t say a word.

Itachi is the one to relent this time. He changes gears completely. “What of Konoha? Should you not apologize to the village for helping Kurama kidnap the jinchuuriki?”

Izuna clicks his tongue. “His name is Naruto.”

“I know that.”

“If you know his name, then use it,” Izuna snaps back, “some people don’t have the luxury of being known.”

Itachi blinks at him, wide eyed and all too entirely innocent. He lowers his gaze to the ground. “I’m sorry. It's a habit for anbu to only speak of Naruto in this way.”

“I know, and that’s the problem.”

Itachi looks mildly put off by that notion. “You never answered my question.

Izuna huffs, annoyed. He runs a hand through his hair while he thinks, uncomfortably aware of Itachi staring at the covered left side of his face. He’d be surprised if Itachi didn’t figure out what he was hiding by the end of this conversation. Eventually, Izuna lands on a truth he doesn’t mind sharing. “I don’t exactly agree with Kurama’s methods.”

That did not surprise Itachi. “Then why help him?”

He clenches his jaw involuntarily as his mind reels back to Naruto's eyes flooding with red, to his gold hair turning to blood. When he blinks, he's back in the cool darkness of his mind. Pebbles bury themselves under his feet. The small rippling water fills his ears. The moon winks at him. And Itachi stares from his side relentlessly.

"Itachi, you're not stupid. You know why."

"Tell me anyway."

"Why don't you say it?" Izuna challenges right back. He stares into Itachi's black eyes, daring him to make a move. The younger teen doesn't even flinch. Somehow, Izuna feels he's lost the game. He doesn't relent. "Go on. It's on your mind, isn't it? If what you're doing is wrong. If the village is wrong, if your hokage is wrong, if the whole shinobi world is wrong. Tell me that you think that it's fucked up that Naruto Uzumaki was left alone to rot in the underbelly of your precious village, Itachi. Tell me you're not willing to...to leave a child all alone without anyone else!"

"I just follow orders." Itachi dismisses, though there's tension in his shoulders, a stiffness to the way he shifts.

Izuna nearly bites his tongue when the onslaught of rage that he had buried comes bubbling up to the surface. Itachi's words are a scathing, cruel jab at Izuna's very existence. And at the expense of all the measures he's taken to keep himself from coming under suspicion in *this* way, he lets it all fall until he's twelve again, seething, hating, spitting on Itachi's name.

He pins Itachi to the spot, because his brother might be fast, but they're in *his* mind. *His* genjutsu, and no matter how great Itachi is, he doesn't have a rinnegan, and when he's nothing but a limited chakra construct of a clone and thirteen years old it's painfully easy. Izuna brings their faces close, looming over him as he shoves him into the stones. He wants Itachi to see his fury, to see the tomoe in his rinnegan spinning. He's spilling secrets faster than he can get them, but he doesn't care. He wants Itachi to know his hate.

"Would you say the same if it were Sasuke?" He spits, "Would you abandon him, let him fester alone in his own thoughts until he thinks of nothing but selfish hatred? Would you do that, *Itachi?* "

Itachi dashes out over the water, not even a ripple from his foot falls. He leaves a good chunk of space between them, then feels around his belt for tools. He doesn't have weapons in Izuna's mind, because Izuna made it like that. Itachi squares his shoulders when the realization hits. His sharingan whirls. Only three tomoe. No Mangekyo in sight. "How do you know about him?"

"Who?" Izuna tilts his head innocently, his fury narrowing down into a smile, into a burning single point that singes the edges of his heart. Somewhere on the horizon, the blazing red of a sunrise starts to bleed out over his pitch black waves.

"You know who!" It's the first time Itachi's raised his voice above a calm whisper. The sound vibrates off the abyss like they're in a massive cave. "How do you know about Sasuke?"

It's Izuna's turn to wave him off. He turns his back, just to test if Itachi will attack him then. He doesn't, surprisingly. "We're not here to talk about your brother." Izuna grins from the irony of it all. "I was just putting it into perspective. If Naruto was an Uchiha kid, the clan would throw a fit. If he were a Nara, or an Akimichi, or a Hyuuga, then there would be hell. But because he has no one left in that village, no one with any standing of power, all he can do is...slip through the cracks."

"So, what are you? You're not his clan. You're *my* clan, as far as blood is concerned. What is it you think you're doing then, taking him away from everything he's ever known. You said it yourself, he'll probably ask to be taken home at some point."

Izuna pauses at that. "So he told you that much…" He says to himself. He whirls around to face Itachi again. He's a lot closer than when he had his back turned, but still a good distance. Not close enough to reach out and grab. "If he wants to go, then he will. Kurama isn't his captor. I've been made aware you were there when it happened. So you heard what Kurama said to him. The decision to leave was *his.* And if he returns, then I will as well."

Itachi clicks his tongue. "He's seven. He can't make those kinds of decisions for himself. And what is your involvement with him? You're what? Twenty? You're too young to be his guardian. He's not your responsibility."

"Then whose responsibility is it?"

Itachi narrows his eyes. "The...Hokage's."

Izuna outright laughs at him. "Oh what a fine job he's done! Shove him in the worst corner of the village, let him fend for his own, assign shadows to stalk his roof but no one he can talk to? What kind of life is that…"

"One where he's living!"

"One where he's *surviving!* There's a difference, but of course *you* wouldn't be able to tell." Itachi flinches like he's been punched. "Oh shinobi are so famously bad at this-" Izuna mutters to himself. He pinches the bridge of his nose. This Itachi is young. This Itachi doesn't have a mangekyo. This Itachi did not murder his clan and never will. He won't abandon Sasuke. He *won't.*

"This meeting is over," Izuna says with finality. One more minute with Itachi and he might snap for real. He might break down and just tell him who he is. He might become Sasuke again.

Itachi starts forward, "wait-" but Izuna cuts the genjutsu, and the real world blurs back into focus.

The moment he's free of his own mind, Karasu pounces on the crow and pops it in a burst of black feathers and smoke.

Chapter End Notes

There are a lot of characters just suddenly here and trying to remember where everyone is and with who and giving them meaningful dialogue and character beats is HARD. I feel like the moment Kurama and Naruto met up with Izuna, Fuu just... became less important which I don't REALLY like, but also it's bound to happen bc everyone met her like only so long ago. And we definitely WILL go Akatasuki hunting soon. Probably not the next chapter, but soon.

And god do I love just having characters get scrolls and letters and NOT reading them in the same chapter.

A Fool's Words

Chapter Notes

> Oh boy, this is one of those chapters I just need to add for plot shit. Not my best, highly un-editted, enjoy the mess!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kurama paces back and forth across the room. Izuna sits in view of the door, organizing his new stock of weapons. Last night, he'd caved and bought Naruto *his* own kunai set, and he and Fuu have been throwing them at him ever since. He catches one as it whizzes by his ear, then idly throws it back. He hears a collection of shrieks and a thunk of metal in wood.

"You could have hit us!" Fuu whines. Izuna compiles his shuriken and tucks them safely into one of his cloak's many pockets. With half the kunai and his new tanto, he rolls out a storage scroll and starts inking in new seals.

"I hit the wall," he says matter of fact while he starts his inking. "There's no chance I could have hit you."

"How?" Naruto pipes up, a bit closer than he was moments ago, "You weren't looking!"

"I don't need to look to know where you are." A chorus of confusion follows. Izuna smiles to himself. He hears them patter around the room for a bit. Fuu gets close, and she wobbles on the balls of her feet like she's going to pounce. She finally launches herself at him. He catches her midair and dangles her from her ankle. "Try again," He says.

"Put me down damnit!" She yells.

Naruto starts giggling. "Damnit," he whispers to himself. Kurama stops his pacing to glare at Izuna. Izuna glares right back. He drops Fuu and she back springs into an upright position. He settles back down in front of his seals and gets back to work. It only takes a few seconds for Naruto and Fuu to settle in front of him to watch.

"If you want to be shinobi, the first thing you've got to learn is to mask your presence," He tells them.

Naruto groans, "you're talking in the same riddles Iruka sensei does!"

"How do we do that?" Fuu asks.

"The easiest way? You learn to be quiet."

“That’s not cool!” Naruto bemoans. He reaches for one of Izuna’s kunai, but he gets a mean flick on the wrist by the back end of Izuna’s brush. Naruto scowls.

Izuna peers up at them through his bangs. They look at him with bright, hopeful eyes. He tortures them by slowly and carefully finishing off the seal he’s working on. Only after he’s done does he straighten up and set down his brush. He looks between the two. “Naruto, do you think foxes are cool?” Kurama pauses again. Izuna can feel red eyes boring into his back.

“Yes! Your foxes are so cool! And Kurama always calls me a kit, that's like a kid fox right? And they’re super fluffy and they laugh funny, and they’re powerful too, like Karasu! He can fly and walk on fire!”

Izuna hums his approval of this assessment. “Foxes are also good at being quiet when they want. When foxes hunt, they move in a way that makes their steps silent and without even the slightest vibrations. Anything less and their prey will escape them.”

“So foxes are like ninja?” Naruto asks.

“More...ninja are like foxes. Or wolves. Or cats. Many shinobi use animals as their reference of fighting style or stealth.”

“Like the anbu masks!” Naruto tries to snap his fingers like this is the biggest revelation in the world. Izuna nods.

“If you want to learn stealth, a good place to start is by watching them hunt,” Izuna gestures to the huddled pile of red and silver fur. It has been a while since his foxes napped during the day. But they were, in truth, creatures of dawn and dusk. Aka is the only one awake. At the bottom of the pile she swiveled her head when he mentioned them. Her amber eyes blink at them sleepily. Naruto and Fuu grab at each other excitedly.

“We should go hunting with them then,” Naruto deduces immediately, and Izuna just grins a bit too wide. *Oh no, what have I done? I’m sorry Aka.*

“Uh...maybe not right now-”

“Well duh, they’re not hunting right now,” Naruto rolls his eyes, “we should sleep now and go hunting with them at night.”

“Absolutely not,” Kurama interjects finally, much to Naruto’s complaints. “Not while we’re here. On Uzushio, I’ll take you hunting if you really want.”

“Then we should go now, to get there faster!”

“I need more time to build up better chakra reserves,” Izuna says, “I can’t run two and a half days after barely surviving our first sea voyage. And Kurama also needs to rest even if he doesn’t say it.”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Kurama growls.

“You shouldn’t push your luck. It’s my foxes on the line. If you drop them, they’ll die.” The two kids gasp, “yeah, exactly. That cannot happen under any circumstances.”

Kurama rolls his eyes, but doesn’t say anything else. He goes back to his angry pacing. Izuna doesn’t want to think that Kurama’s anxiousness was because of him, but it was.

Stupidly, he’d told Kurama all about the crow that had followed Karasu, and the subsequent conversation he’d had with Itachi. Well, he told him the basics. Mainly that they had just talked. None of the intense, personal detail. Not like his trauma dumping on Kakashi. Speaking of which; that stupid scroll had nothing to do with him at all.

Izuna could tell Kakashi had written it, Karasu would not have taken the scroll, but the words were the Hokage’s—or of Konoha as a whole. The scroll was about Naruto, of course. It made a lot of useless threats, like if they didn’t return Naruto willingly then they would be either killed or locked up. Izuna knows they wouldn’t risk putting any bounties on their heads just yet. The chance a bounty hunter kills them and ransoms Naruto is too high. He knows that he and Kurama could take on most of Konoha’s S class ninja. Izuna had taken care of Danzo and exposed Root's secrets. He’s looked through all the files he could. No one in Root’s arsenal could take them down individually, though Tenzo could come close if he were used as a supporting piece.

A worrying factor is Itachi and Shisui. He doesn’t know much about this period of time. He knows for a fact that Itachi does not have his Mangekyo, but what about Shisui? When did he get his? And his eyes were especially worrying. But Izuna does not want to fight them. He plans to out run them all the way to Uzushio, where it would take an army to break through the ancient barriers.

Once Izuna has sufficiently packed his equipment, he pesters Kurama for his last Uzushio scroll. The fox gives him a red one with gold leaf waves, much too fancy for a simple letter, but beggars can’t be choosers. Izuna flicks the plain tassels.

“No fox charm?” He asks as he unravels the black scroll.

“Only had the two.”

“Where did you find them?”

“Karasu did.”

Izuna glances at the black fox sitting in the window. He’s been watching anything with black feathers ever since he popped Itachi’s crow. Izuna scoffs at the little fox then returns to the blank page.

It takes him a few false starts before he finds the right words. And like a fool, he starts his letter just as he had before.

Kakashi, he writes, and he pauses to think, ***I made two promises to you, and like an idiot, I don’t intend to break them.***

I think I can strike a deal with your Hokage. And I'm sure Itachi can tell you all about me, if he's not being a sulky little bitch because I beat him at his own game. He'll tell you that I could be Konoha's greatest asset, or its greatest enemy. You know what I want.

So. I wish to formally request an audience with the Hokage and the Konohagakure counsel, including the heads of all the major clans. I want to see the look on Fa- Izuna frowns at the words he almost wrote. *I can't wait to see the look on father's face when I reveal all my tricks.* He wants to write, as if he were six years old, writing to Itachi. ***- Fugaku's face when he sees what kind of eyes I have.***

Naruto is not on the table of negotiation, not unless he wants to be. I don't know what's best for him, to be honest. I don't want him completely cut off from Konoha, but in Uzushio, he'll have friends and what's left of his family to help him. What will he have there if I bring him back?

I don't know if I'll stay there. That would depend on you, I suppose. It depends on what you've shared, and what you think.

I'm still your mission, isn't that right?

I've told you some of my secrets.

I know some of yours as well.

We can talk about it when we get the chance. Izuna thinks of something crazy. He pulls his Katana into his lap. At the end sit two, slightly dented bells. He rolls them between his fingers. The red strings were old and brown with dust and mud. Perhaps his first letter wasn't as much of a kicker as he thought it would be. Izuna's an impatient person. He thought his words would at least make Kakashi respond. Instead, all he got were drab words from drab people. People who wanted things from him, who wanted him dead. He doesn't think Kakashi wants him dead, not from what Itachi had told him. *He doesn't see it that way.*

Izuna unties one of his bells. *I only need the one.* He reasons, though his fingers shake as he attaches the silent thing to the end of golden tassels. The red stands out far too much, even with it as muddled as dried blood. The scroll looks much too fine, the bell much too dirty. He squeezes it in his hand, feels the metal press up against his tattoo.

I'll come back for the bell, He writes. A promise. He hopes Kakashi can see it with his strange eyes. ***When we meet again, I'll be sure to take it from you.*** Another promise. Izuna does not think that it'll be much of a fair fight, but Kakashi was known for one thing, and it was surprises.

Izuna sits back and re-reads it. This message is much shorter than the other. He lets the ink dry before rolling it up.

"Do you want to read it?" He offers it to Kurama.

Kurama wrinkles his nose, "I don't want to read you lamenting like a fool."

“You’re not worried I could compromise your goals?”

Kurama snorts, “You wouldn’t even dare.” He says it as easy as breathing. He stalks past him and out the door before Izuna can get another word out, “I’m going for a walk,” *I’m going hunting.* He practically says. The door rattles the wall as it slams. Izuna doesn’t think it’s a good idea to go outside, not when Kurama looks like a red beacon in a sea of green hills and blue rivers. But he also knows what kind of verbal lashing he’ll get if he tries to stop him. Sometimes, it’s just not worth it, sometimes, he likes poking at Kurama like a kid poking a sleeping bear.

“How come we don’t get to go outside?” Naruto complains.

“We went outside this morning,” Fuu tells him, “It’s because everyone is after us.”

Naruto huffs in annoyance. “I don’t see what the big deal is. Almost everyone in Konoha always told me to go away, and now that I am the Hokage sends people to get me back? What’s so special about Naruto Uzumaki anyway…”

“Jinchuuriki are prized weapons,” Izuna says, “The villages like to keep them close, sometimes to the point of isolation.”

“Isolation?”

“They don’t let you go anywhere or talk to anyone in fear of you being taken from them.”

“But you *did* take me from them!” Naruto says with all the cheer in the world. Some wrong twists in Izuna’s gut. Fuu raises her eyebrows at him.

“I thought Kurama asked you if you wanted to go?” Izuna says quietly, as calm as his beating heart would allow.

“Oh, well *yeah.”*

“Then-”

Izuna feels a spike of red hot kyuubi chakra. The door bursts open with a cloud of dust and he’s hit with a wave of power that has him scrambling to his feet. The pile of foxes break apart and scramble away from Kurama with high pitched yelps of alarm, while Fuu and Naruto both jump into each other’s arms.

“We’re leaving. Now,” Kurama hisses between his teeth. His red eyes pierce right through Izuna’s protest. “They’re here.”

A thrill of dread crawls down Izuna’s spine. He sweeps up the rest of his equipment and tucks it all in his cloak. Within seconds they’ve vacated their room, pulled down all their seals, and were clinging themselves into the busy streets. Kurama took point, leading their ragtag pack through the crowds with enough deadly presence to split the mob around them. Izuna kept an eye on their back, with his foxes encircling the two kids trapped in the middle and kept them from lagging behind.

Izuna flicks on his sharingan, scanning the roofs and store fronts and all the faces of the people passing by. He stretches out his senses, feels Karasu somewhere a bit to his left, bounding through the sky like he owned the clouds, feels his foxes and the two pinpricks of Fuu and Naruto. And Kurama, who is like a bonfire on his back.

And then he sees it. A hint of shiny black feathers. Before he can react—before he can even blink—Karasu leaps up and clamps his teeth into the bird.

“No!” Izuna jumps. The crow explodes into a bright orange fireball that blows the fox away. He catches him before he can fall. Karasu’s glassy black eyes roll back into his head. He’s completely limp, and feels much too fragile curled up in Izuna’s arms. The only relief is that he’s still alive, breathing shallow and panting, but still alive. But one unconscious fox is the least of their worries.

Their position is compromised.

The moment Izuna’s feet touch the ground, he runs. Kurama snatches up Naruto and takes off at breakneck speed. Izuna reaches Fuu a second later, and she easily jumps onto his shoulders like it was a practiced move. They dart down the streets, the world a blur as he tries to keep up with Kurama. Right at his back he senses three all too familiar chakra signatures. Behind them are at least ten other anbu. *How did they get so close without Kurama noticing?*

Somewhere within the adrenaline and chaos, Izuna can feel his heart burning with an anger he hasn’t felt in a while. He’s angry at Itachi, for whatever reason. He gets it, he really does, but oh boy does it sting to know his brother sold him out within a heartbeat. They must’ve been following Karasu the moment he left with Konoha’s letter. And now, the little greedy fox could die and it would be Itachi’s fault.

Izuna doesn’t want to hate his brother all over again, but if Karasu dies...well…

He latches onto his hate to keep his feet moving. In order to outrun them, Izuna needs to calm down. He can freak out about one thing or another later. Now is not the time. Now is the time to think.

The first thing he does is catch up to Kurama and casually hands him Karasu. Kurama doesn’t even say a word. His whole form explodes into white and gold and Izuna looks away as if it were too bright. Chakra flows into Karasu, and it takes seconds for him to wake up again.

“How did they get here so fast?” Kurama mutters. He looked mildly annoyed, nothing like the pure frantic anger he’d displayed a minute ago.

“They’ve been following Karasu. They knew where we were the moment Itachi’s crow saw me.”

Kurama shrugs. “Shouldn’t’ve taken the bait.” A small inkling of guilt rolling into his gut, making his skin crawl with shame. But he shoves that all down, it’s not helpful now. He can rot in his self loathing once they make their escape.

Izuna dodges three precisely aimed kunai, ones that would have stuck him in the spine, neck, and skull. *Who threw those?* He spins around, his cloak flying around him in a circle, as he returns the favor with his own. And his eyes are sharper, his throw much more quick. Two kunai pin the anbu's shoulders to the wall, the third crops a centimeter of hair just above his masked face.

He doesn't stop to admire his work, just continues to run. He starts to form a plan. All he has to do is make it to the ocean. And draw out the fire users of this anbu pack. Among the porcelain masks, he finds one of black cloth and hitai-ate, silver hair and mismatched eyes. Kakashi is here. Because why wouldn't he?

Izuna nearly grins at him, because this is just great. Next to Kakashi are Shisui and Itachi. Izuna doesn't need to see their faces to know it's them. All he sees is the hint of red behind those masks, and the black Uchiha hair.

"The whole sharingan clan is here," Kurama says when Izuna falls into step beside him again, "What a happy reunion."

"Take Fuu," Izuna says, barely acknowledging him. He glances over his shoulder, watches as those three bound over roofs, elegant as cats. They'll catch up if Kurama and him keep up this pace. He knows Kurama can go faster. And he wants their fire for himself. "Once we get to the ocean, keep going."

"What are you planning, you crazy bastard?" Kurama mutters. Fuu jumps from Izuna to Kurama. He catches her like she weighs nothing. Izuna also plucks Kurome from his cloak and hands him over. Hokori, it seems, has permanently migrated to Naruto. He's already nestled in the kid's hair like a particularly fluffy hat.

They run all the way to the piers, most of the civilians flooding out of the area when Kurama barrels through. His chakra is disgustingly dark today, and although it turns white hot and glamorous whenever he heals someone, when Kurama wraps himself in his flames and hatred, the things he's known for, the chakra that corrodes and eats away at flesh, he's a walking human repellent. And now his chakra is the darkest of oranges and the blackest of blacks. Izuna can see it flickering off his body, and the more he runs and jumps and the closer the shinobi get, he can see the forms of corporeal tails start to bubble out of the haze.

But Konoha can't know what Kurama is. Not yet. They think of him as an Uzumaki, a jinchuuriki at worst. The moment someone realizes that the kyuubi chakra comes from him and not the tiny terror he carries, all hell will break loose.

They reach the ocean, waves brushing sand gently in the low tide, they keep going, keep running until there is a large enough distance between them, their pursuers, and the village that's become nothing but a sprawl of grey and brown. They're far enough that Izuna feels comfortable when he spins on his heels to plant himself between Konoha's anbu forces, his brother, Shisui, and Kakashi. The latter of which was the first to stop in his pursuit, to catch his eye as if he knew exactly what Izuna was planning.

Kurama keeps going. There is no hesitation in his steps when Izuna falls behind, and he doesn't know what to think of it. *Would you really just leave me here, or do you trust me?*

Izuna flashes through a series of hand signs, he brings his hands to his mouth and inhales the chilling ocean air. Heat gathers up from the bottom of his lungs, a burn that seeps into every fiber of his being. He feels alive, in the cold chill of an autumn breeze, in the heat of a battle that's about to get burnt, he feels everything.

The fireball is large enough to swallow up the moon. It shapes the waves around it. It blazes forward, barreling right for Itachi and Shisui first, the two excited kids at the front of the crowd. They're the first to dodge. They drop themselves into the ocean. And let it roll over them. Kakahsi, at the back of the pack, raises the waves enough to eat the fireball, but the first step has been completed. Izuna sets the precedent for this fight.

A fight of fire.

Itachi and Shisui dredge themselves out of water, but before Izuna can think about them, their anbu squads decide it's time for a show. They get close, Izuna will give them that. When three attack him at once, he's pushed back into the water, they try to drown him first. Izuna wraps them up in fiery wire and throws them far enough they wink out of sight. With the next five, he opens up a swirling vortex and drops them off in Frost Country before he realises just how much chakra his rinnegan eats up. He closes it before they can clamor out.

The rest fall prey to his sharingan. He throws up fireballs to counter the water jutsu's being used, he dissipates everything into steam. He makes fire dragons and aims them at Itachi, who clamors on the water and raises his own walls of fire *Perfect.*

Whenever he gets his hands on an anbu, he shows them the horrific sight of their precious village being burned before their eyes, and no one can stop it. He shows them Kurama's demon form, eating away at anything alive. Consuming flames that choke the skies. He shows them his nightmares. Their future, his past.

And on the ocean, where one false step at they'll be eaten by the waves, the anbu start to realise that falling unconscious is the same as death.

It's Shisui who calls the shots, who tells the rest to retreat, even Kakashi.

Uchiha problem, he signs to them, and something about that sets Izuna on edge.

"I'm *everyone's* problem!" He shouts, catching Shisui off guard. It's the first words he's said since the fight started. He unsheathes his new tanto. It's plain and boring. No bells, no foxes, no black blade or Naruto's seals. It's too heavy. "Turn back before I hurt you!"

"You sound a bit too confident," Shisui fires back, just as Itachi shoots off a series of small fireballs that sizzle the water to vapor and cause Izuna to leap up into the ever-darkening skies. It's still noon. The sun should be shining, but it's not. Izuna grins.

"Is that all the fire you've got?!" He calls. Another dragon flame roars at him. He flips, just barely dodging it. The edge of his cloak catches fire. The moment he lands, Shisui body flickers faster than his eye can keep up. He's never fought Shisui, and now he's realizing that he could get outmatched if he's not careful. Kunai nick his face and shoulder. He deflects the rest on his tanto. He's careful to never look Shisui or Itachi in their eyes, he doesn't know if

he can break from them. And Shisui's are especially worrying, with his unknown capabilities.

He wonders, briefly, when Kakashi will join. He constantly sees his silver hair in the corner of his eye, but he never gets any closer. Izuna gets fed up and finally catches Shisui before he can flicker away. He grabs his hand and uses half of Shisui's chakra to create another massive fireball. It creates a great distance between them again. Shisui stands between Itachi and Kakashi.

Izuna wipes the blood from his cheek. Annoying.

"Did you tell them, Itachi?" Izuna calls, tauntingly, "Did you tell them what we talked about?"

Itachi says nothing, the bastard. Izuna is on a roll though, a cruel streak. He wants a reaction.

He switches his position with Shisui and goes right for Kakashi. Kakashi, to his credit, does not balk when Izuna rushes at him. There's no grace in this attack, not when he tackles him to the water's surface and they roll, much how Kurama had attacked Kakashi in the snow. But he doesn't lash out, even when Kakashi immediately tries to stab him in the chest with a kunai.

Izuna flicks his tanto up and knocks the weapon into the ocean. The blade rests coolly on Kakashi's throat. Kakashi doesn't look him in the eyes, even when he's leaning right over his face. Izuna could be hurt, but he knows the reason. Kakashi learned from his mistakes. Don't look Izuna in the eyes, because he's the betrayer.

The sky darkens and rumbles, he feels the air tingle with electricity. He grins down at Kakashi. "Nice weather we're having," He muses faintly, feel's him struggle to break out of his grip. Izuna tilts the blade farther in, closer to all the arteries in his neck. Kakashi stills.

"Why not kill me? You can right now. Make your life so much easier," Kakashi practically spits at him. "Something about me reminds you of someone from your past, it's why you humored me for so long, it's why you wrote that letter, isn't it? Who am I to you?" Izuna's grin fades at his words. He stares down at Kakashi, at this person who died to save him, who taught him chidori and who tried to teach him so much more. His once sensei, who was too much like him in the past, and if only Izuna had stayed, if only he'd listened to Kakashi just a little more that day.

"You should know not to ask your friends to kill you," Izuna whispers. Kakashi's narrowed eyes go wide. He pulls the blade back a little. "When the lightning starts, get them out of here. I won't be known as a kin killer." he tells him just as he feels the air around him sizzle with Itachi's flaming wire and shuriken. He slips the scroll into Kakashi's hands then switches places with Shisui again. There's a shriek as Shisui and Kakashi crash into each other, and Itachi has to change the course of his fire-laced wires to land harmlessly into the ocean.

Just as the three turn to him again, lightning cracks open the sky, and thunder booms, echoing down into the soles of Izuna's feet. He can feel the power thrumming in the storm.

Everything is just *perfect.* Izuna ditches his tanto and draws his katana. The black metal flashes blue and white, his lightning already racing down the blade. A thousand birds start to chirp, and the sky comes to life with the roar of a hundred lightning strikes.

“I’m not aiming for you directly,” Izuna yells over the cacophony. “But if you don’t move, you’ll get fried!” He lets the waves carry him farther into the ocean, watches as Itachi and Shisui start forward, but Kakashi snatches both of their arms and yanks them back.

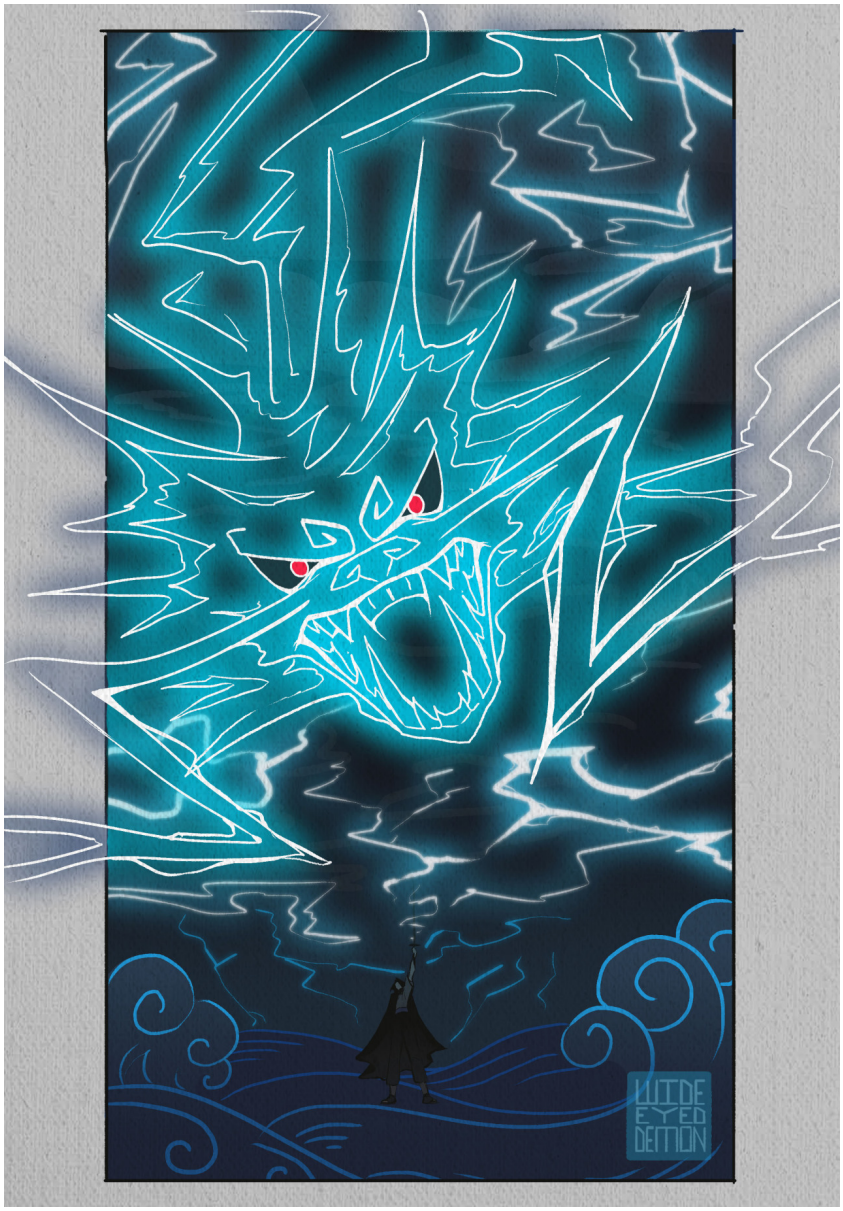
“Run!” Kakashi practically screams at them.

Izuna raises his sword, a glittering halo of blue lightning shoots into the clouds, and from it, spiraling in a swirling vortex of black clouds and white lightning, is Kirin.

He doesn’t strike them, because why would he? He aims at the space between, and he jumps off the water as he brings the dragon down. Kirin bites the ocean and the lightning explodes into a huge starburst of white, dazzling electricity. It rushes through the water within an instant, cooking any unfortunate living thing near the surface, and forcing Kakashi and the Uchiha’s farther and farther back until they’re practically at the shore.

When they are finally out of reach of him, and Izuna is confident they won’t be able to catch up, not when he can spit lightning at them again, he looks back at the three, ragged and waterlogged. He wonders when he’d ever close the distance between them again, instead of forever running away.

~Some Art~



Chapter End Notes

So.... Tbh, next chapter is absolutely *chef's kiss* angst out the wazoo. But this one was just fun little fight because we don't have enough of that, apparently. also keeping track of like... how long it takes to get places is fucking difficult.

LOVE that;

"Nice weather we're having-"

"WHO AM I TO YOU?" moment. Nice, Kakashi, really gotta kill the vibes. Izuna was having fun and you just HAD to open your mouth. Fuckin jeez man. Chill.

Dew in the Window

Chapter Notes

~COOL ART OF KIRIN ON THE LAST CHAPTER IF YOU DIDNT SEE IT~

hello here is the angst as promised, enjoy the trainwreck

eheheh

with Naruto's clones and occasionally be his living test subject. Sometimes, Sasuke feels as distant from him as the moon is to the sun. Only on rare sunrises and sunsets do they cross paths.

Like now, as the morning dew drips down their broken window. As birdsong filters through the walls, as a breeze ruffles the lines of their drying laundry, and the air smells of last night's storm. Naruto makes a sound, a small grunt as he nuzzles against Sasuke's neck, and Sasuke pulls him as close as he can get.

There's a puff of a laugh, and Naruto pulls away from him. Sasuke is immediately disappointed and cold.

"I can't breathe if you do that, bastard," Naruto mutters without any bite. Blue eyes look down at him. They stare for a second, taking each other in. It's not the first time Sasuke's studied his face before, but everytime he does he takes his time. He has the shape of him memorized in the angle of his jaw and the tilt of his eyes and the way his cheeks puff out a bit when he smiles. The slope of his nose, the shape of his mouth that tilts more to the left because when he grins it's a little crooked. The way his unruly, spiky hair catches the light and creates a white-gold halo around his head. The bright, pure blue of his irises flecked with turquoise and a dark ring around the pupil.

Foolishly—and Sasuke knows it's foolish—he thinks that everything's going to be alright. For now it is. Tomorrow was a different story. But Sasuke only thinks of tomorrow when the sun sets.

Naruto leans down and kisses him briefly. Much too brief for Sasuke's liking, but before he can do anything, Naruto pulls away and sits up. Sasuke grabs his hand before he can take off for the day. Because he knows Naruto is as antsy as he is to get going. Neither of them learned much about patience, but Sasuke wants this. Selfishly, he wants Naruto to himself and the rest of the world, dead and burned as it is, can wait one fucking morning.

"Stay," he whispers. He can't look Naruto in the eyes as he says it. "Please. Just for a little longer." Naruto stills in his grip. He flips his hand over and laces their fingers together.

"I'm almost done with the seal," Naruto says, but he turns back towards him like he's a magnet. All Sasuke has to do is look up at him and his resolve crumbles like it was never there. Maybe it wasn't. With mild grumbling, he says, "maybe for a minute."

He flops back on top of Sasuke's chest again and settles down. Sasuke is completely content to just lie there and be a pillow for a bit. After a while, Sasuke feels tugging at the longer strands of his hair. Naruto twirls his fingers through his locks, twisting and pulling occasionally. It takes a minute for him to realize he's braiding it. Sakura must have shown him how.

Sometime ago, when she was alive.

It hurts to think about that, but it's nice to know that there's still something left of her, even if it's just a skill passed from one hand to the next. Sasuke peers over Naruto's fluffy hair to his

Katana resting peacefully in the corner of the room. Even if it's just a branch of sakura engraved into his sword.

He feels a smile press right above his collarbone. Sasuke keeps his depressing thoughts to himself. "Y'know, normally it's me chasing after you."

Sasuke groans. Naruto would bring this up until the day they die. "Not this again."

Naruto pulls on the braid he's just created and snickers evilly. "Ever since we got here you've been following me around like a lost puppy."

Sasuke shoves him sharply. Naruto's hands, still tangled into the thick of his hair, pull him along ungracefully, causing both of them to yelp as they tumble over each other. When they finally untangle somewhat, Sasuke leans forward and scowls at him. "I'm doing nothing of the sort." It's the worst lie he's ever told.

Naruto scoffs. "That's the worst lie you've ever told."

Sasuke clicks his tongue and dives at him instead of a retort. They go down in a pile of tangled limbs and scrabbling hands until Sasuke pins him and sits on his stomach. "You're staying here for more than a minute."

"Then kiss me like you don't want me to leave."

Sasuke does.

* * *

The ocean has been raging for hours. Huge waves crash and fall high above his head. The waters are a rich inky black, white churned seafoam and peppered with freezing, icy rain. He hasn't seen the sun all day, and probably will not until they reach Uzushio's bay area. He couldn't tell if it was still day, or if the sun had set. The sky was nothing but a dark blotch. The sea was nothing but a black abyss. The only source of light is Kurama and five little foxes bounding after them. They were a trail of burning white stars leaping on the ocean like embers dancing on a shadow. Kurama's element is fire, much like Izuna's own, yet he looks completely at home in the raging storms.

Lightning flashes and thunder booms. The hairs of his arms raise despite him being drenched down to his bones. He's more than exhausted at this point. And Fuu, who clings to his back for dear life, was not helping. He'd given her his cloak, though most of it still covers him, and he holds Kurome and Hokori in each arm. She wasn't heavy at all, but after a day and a half of continuously using his chakra to keep himself upright with only a day and a half of rest—where he also, stupidly, used his sharingan to speak to Itachi's clone, and, stupidly, used his sharingan, rinnegan, and a whole lot of fire to fight said brother and his anbu squad—he's not doing too great. Infact, he's doing very much less than great.

He knows that the moment his feet are on semi solid ground again, he'll pass out. He can feel that in every fiber of his being. The only thing keeping him alive is his innate, human desire to continue to do so. Not to mention Fuu, who will take an icy plunge should he drop dead at any second.

For the past hour or so, he's been struggling to keep up to Kurama. That bright white slowly got farther and farther ahead of him. He refuses to be left behind. He refuses to quit. So he pushes on and on, even when he can't feel his legs anymore. Even when he can't feel himself breathing, and his skin is numb to the biting rain. If he jumps a little too high, the wind will catch him and toss him around like he's nothing but a child's toy.

I wish I had my hawks. Garuda would be a blessing right about now. His contract with his old summons had been broken when he'd jumped through time. Another fresh start as far as he's concerned, but annoying to lose his wings.

"About the drop dead yet, brat?" Kurama calls back to him, just barely over the wind. Izuna snarls in his direction, hears the great fox laugh in return, sees his glowing form dart between two massive waves and disappear for a second before reappearing much too close. Izuna can feel the heat radiating off him like a fire pit. Rain sizzles off his aura of chakra. He looks warm. "Need any help?" He asks, quieter, softer, like he actually *cares.*

Izuna does a double take. But in the end he shakes his head. It's too much effort to talk. But he *will not* take Kurama's chakra. Not when he's supporting his foxes, and when he's been running much longer than Izuna. Those logical things are all excuses. *If only I hadn't fought them. If only I ran away…*

Kurama studies him for a second, silent as he can be, while also being so incredibly loud. Izuna can hear the rain evaporating off his chakra. He can *hear* whatever judgemental thoughts were playing behind his red eyes. In the end, he says nothing about Izuna's refusal. "We're almost there!" He shouts at him. Fuu does an excited whoop from his back and near vaults them both right into a cresting wave in her enthusiasm.

Almost there. Almost there. Almost on the other side of this stupid storm.

True to Kurama's word, they run for two more hours before they reach the first barrier. It's still firmly in the storm, but just beyond it Izuna can see the first inklings of light peeking through the clouds. They're close, and in his haste to be over with this, he rushes ahead of Kurama...and face first into the barrier. Izuna's and Fuu's chakra are violently rejected and he recoils from the collision. His chakra wavers enough for him to slip a couple of feet into the water before he regains his senses. Fuu shrieks and scrambles up to stand on Izuna's shoulders.

Kurama doesn't even laugh, simply stops next to him and opens it without a snide comment or treacherous bark of laughter. A true testament to both their exhaustion. His hands flash through a series of signs, and he flares his chakra red and black. "Hurry up, it closes fast," he says, and Izuna darts past him.

Izuna signs a quick, *how many?* They're Konoha hand signs, does Kurama even know them?

“Five.” Kurama mutters, “I found seven but two require reworking. I want nine in the future.”

Izuna rolls his eyes. Of course he’d be vain enough to make *nine* different barriers.

The other four Izuna does not run into. His eyes are drooping when he finally sees the sunlight. The pure relief that shoots through him nearly causes him to collapse on the spot. The ocean calms down drastically when they make it to the last barrier, this one just outside the bay. Fuu gasps when she sees the island. Naruto, perched on top of Kurama’s shoulders, starts wiggling so much he nearly topples into the ocean. Kurama has to catch him by the collar of his shirt as he tries to launch himself into the water.

“Hold on kit, If you hit this border you’ll go flying!” Kurama laughs.

“It’s so pretty!” He shouts, blue eyes practically sparkling. “Is this really where the Uzumaki lived? This is where my mom came from?!”

Kurama nods emphatically as he starts going through the motions to open up the barrier. Once they’re through and walking along calmer, pristine turquoise waters, Izuna’s chakra exhaustion hits him full force. He makes it the last few meters, and practically drags himself onto the semi solid sand and immediately collapses. He shuts his eyes and focuses on his breathing, trying not to pass out. Around him he hears the pitter patter of fox paws and excited scrambling on the beach. Naruto and Fuu take to the Uzushio coast line like flies to honey. He hopes they don’t go darting off into the tropical forests before Kurama can catch them. He hopes Naruto doesn’t stumble across the ruins before either of them can make sure that he understands what happened here before he sees it with his own two eyes.

He’s soaked to the bone from sea water, smelling of salt and seaweed. The sun is high and bright, drying off his heavy clothes and seeping into his waterlogged bones. Even laying flat on the ground he can still feel the sway of the waves in his stomach. He feels his muscles scream and ache from all that running. Consciousness is slipping from him. Izuna tries to get his hands under him to at least push himself off the sand, but to no avail. He gets his hands braced, takes a breath, and promptly blacks out.

Izuna wakes up groggily, like he’s been resurrected from the dead. His eyes can barely open, there’s so much grime in them, and he doesn’t have the energy to rub them. He blinks, heavy and slow, up at a ceiling that is all too familiar. He hears a faint birdsong, one that he’s woken up to dozens upon dozens of times. He smells the sun after a storm, and hears the drip of dew drops in the window.

Izuna sits up in one go, fast enough that all the blood rushes out of his head and his vision goes dark. A headache starts to worm its way to the middle of his skull. But none of that matters, because he’s here, surrounded by half rumbled blankets and a mess of sprawled out futons. And the window is broken. And the birds are chirping. And rays of dusty gold sunlight stream through the window and he knows exactly where he is.

It’s stupid to be hopeful. It’s stupid to think it, but he does. He does because he’s woken up in this very room dozens of times, to those very birds and those very sun rays, parted ever just so by those same tree branches. He’s smelled the wet stones from a night storm too many times, and the must of old blankets and the creeping vines up half-cracked walls. He hopes, for moments and more moments, as he feels the grogginess wear off his limbs, and he wonders if today is just like any other day, where Naruto was no where else but down in an old library filled with old books, and Madara was just a far off dream of the future. That time travel was nothing but something that Naruto was working on, that all those things and all those aching pains he felt were figments he’s made up with an over anxious mind.

He prays to whatever god will listen, to gods he doesn’t believe in, that when he walks outside he’ll see dozens of familiar clones with all the same face. But Izuna knows, down from the ache in his bones to all the new images that flash through his eyes, that he’s stupid to be so wishful, and thinking of such things, *wanting* such things, will only lead to more pain.

Foolishly—and Izuna knows it's foolish—he wishes and thinks it anyway.

So when he hears the floorboards creak, his heart leaps into his throat. He sits there, as still as death. He stops breathing, because *what if I could have this? What if it was all nothing but a bad dream?* He wants it to be real. He wants it so bad that he can feel the ache in his chest, the hole in his heart because he knows the ever present truth.

And the truth walks in dressed in red.

With red hair and red eyes and a red haori patterned in orange waves.

Kurama steps into the room much too softly for a demon. He has his hands tucked into the folds of the haori. Izuna can’t see his claws. Izuna can’t see his fangs. He looks much too human for Izuna’s liking, and he can’t look away. He can’t breathe. He can’t move, even as Kurama gets closer and closer. His feet make no noise as he moves over soft futons and dusty blankets. He stops only a few steps from him, then settles down cross legged in one fluid motion. Izuna’s eyes burn. He doesn’t blink even when they get dry and itchy. He’s forgotten how.

He’s forgotten how to live, hasn’t he?

“You scared Naruto and Fuu half to death,” Kurama growls low, no bite to it. Simply words in his throat. Izuna stares at him. He hears the dew drops on the window fall into a puddle on the floor. A breeze comes in through the window, smelling of the ocean and the forest. Somewhere, he can hear the faint laughter of children playing. A far off dream that stirs decade old memories, buried under a haze of red.

Uzushio has always been filled with beautiful sunlight, and it cascades down into the room to blind him. It catches in Kurama's hair, turning the edges gold and pink. Izuna averts his gaze. He tries to look anywhere else, but he can still see him in the corners of his eyes. “That so?” He says. It’s all he can manage around the lump in his throat.

“You could have asked for help.” Kurama looks at him with eyes much too wide. He’s not scrunching up his face like he normally does, and it makes him appear… younger. More open.

Izuna clenches his teeth. Something dark and horrible wells up inside his chest. It’s the opposite of what the sun felt like on his skin. This was cold and all consuming and painful and too familiar. “I don’t want help,” He chokes out. Kurama opens his mouth, white fangs glint, Izuna cuts him off. “Not from you.” *I don’t want your chakra, I don’t want your hands on me, and I don’t want you.*

Red eyes twitch, drawing him back to look at whatever expression Kurama pulls. There’s a slight curl to his lip, the beginning of a snarl. But it smooths out quick enough. He lowers his head, to Izuna’s shock. Kurama sighs, long suffering and heavy. It’s the sigh of a being that has lived much too long. Sometimes, Izuna forgets that. He forgets that Kurama is an old beast with nine tails and chakra harsh enough to burn flesh to ashes. He’ll never forget whose skin he wears, but it’s almost painfully normal to see Kurama as more human than demon, more Naruto than Kyuubi. Things like fangs and claws remind him. Not enough, apparently, and that grates on Izuna’s nerves to no end.

The fox lets his selfish words hang in the air until they’re nothing but a burning pit in Izuna’s stomach. Kurama grimaces at him, too much human and not enough demon. His chest becomes painfully tight. “If you die because you refuse my help, Naruto will kill you again in the afterlife.”

Kurama provokes too much, and for once it’s a relief.

Anger is an easy emotion. Painful and sharp and so, so easy.

Izuna snarls at him. He lunges forward and goes right for the neck. He’s much too slow, much too clumsy. He’s running on fumes and Kurama is Kurama. He dodges and knocks him down with a short tussle where they roll over each other. Izuna gets one nasty punch to his windpipe before Kurama traps one wrist with his foot and the other in an iron grip. His other knee comes down on his chest, pushing the air from his lungs. Izuna can’t even mold enough chakra to make a puff of smoke, but he activates his sharingan. His eyes well up with blood. He can’t attempt a genjutsu. All he sees is red hair tumbling around his face, and all he can hear is Naruto telling him that he’d be here. *I gave up everything for a fucking demon. I broke all my ties to my clan and to Kakashi for him!*

“I’ll kill you!” He screams and thrashes around as much as he can, Kurama tightens his grip. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Stop it, you stupid brat!” Kurama yells, he shakes him like a ragdoll.

Izuna doesn’t. How could he? Why should he? “It was supposed to be him! He was supposed to be here, he promised it! He said he’d see me on the other side but all I have is *you!”*

Kurama growls at him again, he can see fire in the back of his throat, and for a split second Izuna stops to think, *He’s going to kill me,* before Kurama clamps his teeth together with a puff of smoke. In a flash he cracks their skulls together. A blinding white pain erupts from the

middle of his forehead and reverberates down his entire body. In his shock he freezes up, in his pain he goes limp. Kurama releases him, blood dripping down his face. The wound heals before the blood can dry. He leans back and returns to his previous spot, only this time he keeps his claws out, as if Izuna would attack him again.

Izuna lays there, stunned and panting like a dog as he tries to regain his senses. He brings a shaking hand up to his own head and presses at the welt already forming. A trickle of blood runs down his temple, mixing with the blood that runs down his cheeks from his eyes. He takes a few steadying breaths and tries to string together some actual thoughts before he sits up again.

"You look disgusting," Kurama says gruffly. He picks at his claws.

Izuna glares at him. He rubs at his wrists. They size each other up.

"Turn off your eyes before you pass out," Kurama snaps, "they're not helping you." He wipes at the blood on his face with the sleeve of his haori. Izuna, despite wanting to be a stubborn asshole, flicks off his sharingan. But only because Kurama was right in that he was on the verge of passing out again. He continues to glare daggers at him. Kurama doesn't spare him another glance. He stands, and for some reason Izuna is deeply alarmed by this. It's something almost instinctual that tells him to make Kurama stay here.

"You should clean off that blood before you go outside. The kids don't need to see you like that."

Kurama turns to leave. Panic seizes him. Izuna has to stop him somehow, to keep him here. *Just for a little longer.* "Why here?" He asks, "Why this house? Why this room?"

Kurama hesitates by the door way. One clawed hand drags along the rotted wooden frame. He looks out the window, watches each drop of water fall, the leaves on the trees cast light shadows on the ground. His expression is sullen, grey and black in the shadows, far off. He's not here, not unlike Izuna. He's somewhere else.

Not for the first time, Izuna wonders what's going on in Kurama's head. He couldn't imagine it, trying to live in a body that is not even your own. How many of his unconscious decisions weren't his at all, but just Naruto's muscle memory telling him where to go? Was it just that this was a familiar place, somewhere he knew because of course he would, it was a well beaten path by the time they'd left. Or was it something else? *Someone else?*

Did Izuna even want to hear the answer?

"I…I'm not him, Izuna."

"I know that." Izuna says without thinking. Consciously, he does know that.

Red eyes squint at him skeptically. Knowingly. "Do you? Do you know that?"

The accusation stings worse than any of his wounds. "Yes, I do. I can't forget that you-"

“-then if you know that, why are you asking me these questions? Why are you asking me to…” Kurama dies off, he moves his hands around like he’s physically looking for the words. But Izuna knows, and he hates that Kurama knows *exactly* what he’s doing. *Why are you asking me to stay?* It’s said in Kurama’s silence. Izuna responds with his own.

Finally, Kurama speaks. It’s harsh, and quiet, and much too emotional. “Are you waiting for me to miraculously turn into him?” Ice slips down Izuna’s veins, and he hates himself. Kurama knows him better than he knows himself. Or, Kurama knows what hatred is more than Izuna. He knows pain better than any person alive.

“You’re waiting for him and he’s not here. Trust me, I wish he was too. I’ve looked and looked inside this stupid body for any trace of his chakra, and he’s not *here.* He’s not anywhere besides that little boy who needs a family. And he doesn’t need to see us try to kill each other because we’re sorry, grieving bastards who can’t let go of the fucking past.”

There’s a threat in there, somewhere. Izuna can taste it like he tastes blood in his mouth.

“In your grief you’ll hurt others,” Kurama says, “Like you have before-” Izuna makes a move to protest but Kurama beats him to it, “Like I have before. Because we fucking suck at this, and we’re selfish creatures. I learned a lot from Naruto, as did you.” Kurama rubs the middle of his right hand. Izuna looks to his left, where a moon tattoo winks at him. The sun was gone, burned away by Kurama’s chakra when they made that wretched jump through time. Nothing of it remains. “Being alone is the worst possible grief. Naruto did not leave you alone, you stupid brat. So I won’t tell you to go until you figure shit out. And I won’t push you away even though you hate my fucking guts.”

Izuna scoffs, “As if you don’t hate me right back.”

Kurama doesn’t take the bait, which causes him to pause. He doesn’t laugh at him or tell him he’s right, he simply looks at Izuna with clear, red eyes. Something irritable and confusing starts to worm through all the coiling, clogging grief in his chest. Izuna wants to rip it out and stomp it to the dirt.

“You hate the Uchiha,” Izuna says, punctuating each word because it’s a fact. It’s as true as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west.

Kurama considers that at least. Izuna’s relief surprises himself, but it’s as if his entire perception of Kurama has been flipped on its head. It has been shifting, he knows, ever since they landed on the other side with no Naruto to be a physical and mental barrier between them. But this...Izuna had been so sure of Kurama’s hate towards him long before their time travel trip. Simply him being an Uchiha would be enough reason. Most people hate him naturally anyway. He’s infuriating, aggravating, antagonizing, arrogant...

Izuna’s mouth is too dry, and his tongue feels as heavy as lead. He wants to confirm it, to say it again and watch any micro expressions on Kurama’s face, to catch him in a lie. But he can’t. He can’t bring himself to ask. Kurama seems content to leave it at that.

“I don’t.”

“What?” Izuna says too fast, like he’s been expecting it.

“I don’t hate the Uchiha. Not any more. Well…” Kurama makes a sour face, “I hate a few. Those who wronged me...Madara, Obito...I hate what your clan represents, and I hate that they think they can control me.”

“I could.”

“But you won’t.” And Kurama says this like it's a fact. Just as sure that Izuna would never use his eyes on him, as Izuna had been of his hatred. It’s the most surprising thing Kurama’s said so far.

“I...I tried before.”

Kurama snarls at him, and Izuna doesn’t flinch. Something settles in him, something like a stone dropping right through his clouds of pent up rage, exhaustion, and sorrow. It rips them apart and they fray along their edges, becoming no more dangerous than mist in the eye of a storm. Kurama trusts *him,* the most untrustworthy bastard in all the nations. It should have been obvious. Kurama trusts him with Fuu. He trusts him with Kakashi and Konoha. He trusts him to not share his secrets. *He trusts me with something more valuable than his life; his freedom.*

“I gave up a lot to follow you here,” Izuna says, testing the waters. He’s practically poking him with a stick, trying to get a nasty reaction out of him. Anything but this soft, horrible mushy shit that was absolutely not befitting of a demon.

Kurama is horribly disappointing in that regard. “Do you *want* me to thank you?” It’s barely a question, borderline an insult laced with annoyance that doesn’t quite sit right in Izuna’s ears.

“Yes.”

Kurama gets up and leaves.

Chapter End Notes

Imma be real, they absolutely kissed in my first drafts (right after Izuna was like "bitch you hate me" and kurama went, "bet"-ANYWAY) and I cut it because I thought it didn't make sense for both of their current mental states, (though because of their current mental states it absolutely makes fucking sense! and would be a total mistake!)

do with that information what you will.
AHAH

tbh, I don't know if I even want to write in a romance at this point (because I'm a big coward abt it) either way, we'd have to get over all the angsty grieving stuff first...

Lightning Heart

Chapter Notes

> alright bitches, its been a little while, have a shitty chapter so we can keep this ball rolling

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Three days. It takes three days for their forces to reassemble—for the fourth time, Shisui complains dutifully loud in Kakashi's ear. Three days of them being cooped up inside with Itachi's crows fluttering in and out through the constantly open window. The one time Kakashi closed it—four hours ago on the dot—three crows had slammed their beaks into the glass and Itachi came running like a mother hen. Then he'd whirled on Kakashi with a red-eyed glare before darting out the window himself.

Itachi has been the busiest out of the entire anbu squad. He constantly runs correspondence between them, Konoha, and the rapidly approaching Jiraya—the sannin should be here any hour now. Kakashi pretends to not notice the extra crow that flies off in Konoha's direction, encoded and utterly indecipherable unless the reader had eyes just like the writer. He pretends he doesn't hear Itachi and Shisui muttering about purple eyes and swirling patterns and things beyond three tomoe. He pretends Izuna's name isn't thrown around like leaves in the autumn wind.

It takes three days for things to happen, is what he's saying. And they start to happen in the form of a fucking fox, of all things.

"Shut that fucking window," Shisui says as he steps into their room covered in black feathers and twigs in his hair. "Your crows keep mobbing me!"

Itachi looks mildly miffed, and instead of doing anything, he simply turns his head like an angry cat. Shisui fumes silently, and he goes to close it himself.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Kakashi warns, "the birds will hit the window." Shisui turns to face him, he opens his mouth to speak, and then a creature that's decisively larger than a crow bursts through the window and knocks him flat on his ass.

Kakashi and Itachi are on their feet before the dust settles. And there he is, the little bastard himself. Karasu in all his two tailed glory paces restlessly on Shisui's chest. He hops down gracefully, but the instant his black glassy eyes sweep over Kakashi and land on Itachi, purple fire sparks in his shadowy fur.

Karasu hisses, sounding much like a boiling kettle, and he launches his tiny form at him. Itachi dodges quickly, he puts his hand on his tanto, ready to draw.

“What’s his problem?!” Shisui sputters as he stands back up.

“Get him to stop,” Itachi says, sounding annoyed as he sticks to the roof just to get purple fire spat at him. Karasu does a double jump, sparks on his paws, and lands a hit on Itachi just as the kid looks to Kakashi for guidance.

“Karasu, stop,” Kakashi says non committedly. Karasu doesn’t spare him a glance. Kakashi chuckles. “He’s mad about the other day, probably.”

Itachi grimaces. Finally, he takes his hand from his blade and catches the ball of fluff in the air and shoves him back. Karasu rolls, head over tails, and springs back up onto his paws with a hiss. Kakashi decides to intervene and grabs a handful of the shaggy fur at the base of his neck. Karasu turns on him and bites his hand with a curl of his gums. Once the little terror locks eyes with him though, his ears flick forward and his teeth retreat. He licks Kakashi’s bleeding hand, then he laughs as all foxes should.

They settle down after that. Itachi unsticks from the wall, and comes over to Karasu with slow, deliberate movements, as if Karsu would leap at him again. Hell, he probably would.

“The score’s settled, it seems.” Kakashi concludes when all Karasu does in response to Itachi is stare at him, the same way he stares when he’s protecting a letter. Speaking of which-

“He’s here for your answer, isn’t he?” Shisui says before Kakashi can do anything. “You haven’t written anything though, have you?”

“Nope,” Kakashi lies through his teeth and a fake smile. “I’m waiting for the latest response from the hokage. Now that he knows what, exactly, Izuna wants from us, it's his turn to bring terms. Izuna believes Naruto is not on the table, so to speak, but…”

“-but I doubt The hokage will sanction a meeting without Naruto being returned,” Itachi finishes.

“Exactly. Which means-”

“-Izuna’s request will most likely be denied,” Shisui scoffs, “what...what does he think he has that Konoha could want?” He says these words and shares a quick look with Itachi. So the words mean next to nothing. Shisui knows that Izuna has something Konoha could want, or more specifically, something the Uchiha would want.

Kakashi pretends he doesn’t notice. He sighs. “The sad truth of the matter is that...we can’t *get* Naruto back. It’s… it’s impossible. Izuna and Kurama are just...they’re not in the same class as us, so to speak.”

“We’re the top of the classes,” Shisui points out miserably, “save for the Hokage… and the sannin. I bet Itachi could go toe to toe with one of them, possibly.” Itachi shoves his shoulder roughly.

Kakashi thinks about Minato, and how much easier this could be if he were here. They would never be this far behind their targets. They’d always be just ahead. A blink and you’ll miss it,

and their mission would be over. If Minato were here, this whole fiasco with Naruto would never have happened in the first place. *If he were here, Naruto wouldn't be the lonely kyuubi orphan.*

Thinking like that would get him nowhere though. So he stops thinking. "Jiraiya-"

A sparrow mask appears in the window. They all turn to the anbu for the news. Sparrow stares pointedly at Karasu for a total of ten seconds before he snaps out of it and delivers his message. "Jiraiya will be here momentarily," He says, he takes one more look at Karasu, then is gone with a puff of purple smoke.

"Has anyone alive seen a two tailed fox before?" Shisui mutters, "I haven't. Have you?" He asks Itachi.

His cousin shakes his head. They turn to Kakashi. "First time I saw him he appeared in my campfire, I nearly had a heart attack," He says truthfully, "We should gather up everyone and talk strategy."

"Right," Shisui says, he jerks his head at Itachi, who in turn rolls his eyes, fastens his mask over his face, and disperses in a flock of crows. Karasu growls and grabs one out of the air and pops it with vicious glee. "He needs to stop that!" Shisui complains, "Kakashi, get him to stop!"

"I can't," Kakashi shrugs, "Not even Izuna controls them."

"That's bullshit, he probably told you that so you don't complain about it!"

Kakashi doesn't dignify him with an answer. Instead he gets to work clearing the floor of all their currently sorted tools and unsorted jumble of already-read scrolls. Kakashi makes sure that Izuna's scroll hasn't gone missing recently. Shisui and Itachi had already read it. With no fox in sight, Kakashi allowed them, though he sort of regrets it. Izuna wrote to him in a way that was...too familiar so to speak.

Besides his accursed words, Izuna had also gifted him one of his silent bells, and this...this was something Kakashi did not expect in the slightest. *Izuna trusts me. Alot. More than I trust him, that's for sure.*

Kakashi senses the arrival of Jirayia, shortly followed by Itachi and the rest of their anbu procession. Him and Shisui both stand and face the door as it slides open with a snap. There's a long, weighted pause where Jiraiya scrutinizes each of them. First Kakashi, then Shisui, and then...then his eyes roam down to Karasu, standing at his full height of only a foot and a half tall, with his fangs bared and bushy two tails bristling. Kakashi has the urge to move, to break the line of sight because as it stands, either of them look about ready to pounce on each other.

But then Jiraiya breaks out into a goofy grin and crouches down to Karasu's height. It startles the fox, to say the least. His ears go back, and he darts towards Kakashi, like he'd be his saving grace. And well, if that isn't damning, then Kakashi doesn't know what is.

“Oho? That’s interesting,” Jiraiya muses. He rubs his chin. “This is Izuna Uchiha’s fox?”

“One of them,” Kakashi says. He doesn’t let Karasu hide behind him. The fox glares at him and bites his ankle. “This is how we can communicate with him and Kurama.”

Jiraiya hums as he sits down and gestures for the rest to follow suit, eyes trained on Karasu. Itachi slips in behind him and kneels, which he shuts down instantly, “Sit *down* kid, I’m not your superior. We’re working together on this.”

Along with Itachi, Sparrow, Owl, and Beetle all crowd into the room. Two more hang around the door, Kakashi spots three of them hanging upside down just out the open window. The rest are still patrolling, looking for any signs of trouble or any correspondence.

“Itachi kept me up to date, mostly, so I know all about your trek around the nations with this kid—he is a kid, isn’t he? As much as a brat as you?”

“I...He...I think he’s around 20 years old, yes.”

“Hmm...with Uchiha it *can* be hard to guess. But if you say so. Izuna Uchiha…what a name to have.” Jiraiya seems deeply amused by the whole situation, which is slightly off putting, given how much grief Izuna and Kurama have already put them through. But to the eyes of someone like Jiraiya, perhaps all of this feels a bit… distant, trivial, *amusing.* “So we have a, supposedly, nomadic Uchiha that runs with a pack of foxes, teamed up with a revolutionary Uzumaki, kidnapped *several* jinchuuriki, and galavanted away to the Uzumaki homeland. Am I missing anything?”

Kakashi raises his hand timidly, “He also has a personal beef with the Akatsuki.”

“What?” Jiraiya’s face morphs into something grave. Suddenly, the light air around him crumbles.

Kakashi keeps going. Because whatever information Jiraiya *thinks* is important, *is* important. “He hunts them. He says he knows more about them than anyone else. And he’s willing to give the information to Konoha.”

Jiraiya takes it all in. Quietly, he asks, “What does he look like?”

All eyes go straight to Itachi. Itachi doesn’t move a muscle.

“He looks like this kid?”

“Izuna could be his older brother,” Shisui says, “he covers his left eye with his hair.”

“-I’ve seen it,” Itachi blurts out.

The room drops ten degrees in the silence that follows. Shisui is the first to move, he punches Itachi in the arm. Itachi glares at him right back. There’s a war between them that no one else can see. Eventually, Itachi seems to win. He shoves his cousin away, then he looks around at all the eyes and ears trained on him and he stops.

Jiraiya gets the memo pretty quick. He pulls out a journal and tears a page out. He hands it to Itachi along with a pen. “Draw what it looked like.”

Itachi covers the paper with his hands. It doesn’t stop Kakashi or Shisui activating their sharingans and copying the movements of his hand, but to those sorry, curious anbu just outside their window, just crowding around them in silence, their necks craned trying to get a glimpse of what it could be, they don’t stand a chance. It’s stupidly simple, and incredibly effective.

And once Jiraiya sees what he’s drawn, it's like his entire being shifts on an axis. His jaw clenches tight, his eyes become darker, his hair frizzes slightly. He looks almost ancient, and powerful, and like one more little push, and he’d fly into a rage. And just as he falls into that darkness, he comes right out of it again, frighteningly fast. It’s a split second, a blink and you’ll miss it.

Jiraiya laughs. “It appears this is a bigger problem than I thought!”

* * *

Izuna’s head hits the mattress and he sighs, heavy and weighty in his chest. Without Kurama it’s quiet. The air fills with the rustling of leaves in the window, and songbirds he imagines shooting out of the air. Just so they would stop. Just so he could close his eyes and have everything around him be as quiet and as still as his halting breath. He can feel his blood drying and caking on his skin and it prickles uncomfortably.

He lies there in his stupor for hours. By then, his thoughts have made a mess of his brain, and his limbs are as stiff as stone. He sits up, cracking bones as he goes. It takes another ten minutes for him to stand on shaking legs. Once he does though, he’s suddenly horribly aware of how hollow his stomach is, and how dry his tongue feels behind fuzzy teeth. Izuna is disgusted with himself, to say the least.

He finds his belt with all his scrolls tucked in the corner behind his Katana. His shoes are neatly placed right along with them. Izuna stares at them for a long while, thinking of how they could have gotten there. He knows—logically he does know that Kurama must have taken his shoes off when they got here, and took his ratted, soaked coak off his shoulders—but he can’t fathom Kurama doing such things. He ignores his shoes and unrolls the scroll that has all of his rations. He holds his hand out, pressing fingers to the seal to release it...and he stops. He takes his hand away and rerolls the scroll.

Izuna stands and walks out of the room.

His shoes, his cloak, his katana, and his belt all stay behind.

There is a small living area between the room and the front door. It's just as messy and overgrown as Izuna remembers it; maybe even more-so. There is a low table shoved into a corner with broken, porcelain plates and bowls. He knows the cabinets are filled with smashed glass. He knows that there's a drawer emptied of its knives and nothing else. He knows the fridge is filled with ivy vines and toxic mushrooms. The house on the hills tells a sad story. The whole island felt the same, save for the library which was left completely untouched save for the dust and termites.

Izuna passes through the living room without pause. He knows these things, and he has no room to grieve for these things. The first time, Naruto Instead, he makes his way forward, towards the door, and he gets there without trouble. Why would there be trouble besides the creaky and leaky wooden floor boards, that ache and bend under his feet?

Izuna opens the door. He's greeted by a corus of complaining little idiots crowding around his feet. His heart aches in the way that fills his chest with something. He forgets about the hunger gnawing at him, for just a second. Aka takes one look at him and promptly jumps on him. He has enough strength left to not be knocked completely over, that is until Yuki gets under his feet and trips him. He slips down the front steps with a wince and lands in a heap. Grass tickles his face. The moss is soft at least, though he's pretty sure he hit his head on every stair.

Gin gets right in his face and sniffs him with her cold black nose. It doesn't take her long for her to figure out the blood on him is human in flavor—and it's only slightly concerning that human blood is , decievely, her favorite—and happily cleans his face for him. Izuna lets her, because who is he to stop her?

And this is where all the little jinchuuriki find him, sprawled in the grass, covered in foxes, barefoot and staring up at the sun as if the sun had answers for him. Who knows, maybe it did.

"Is that...Izuna?" Fuu whispers, somewhere over his shoulder, perched in a tree, probably. Feet shuffle. He feels one of the fennecs jump off his chest and dart towards them.

"It is!" Naruto shouts, "Think we can sneak up on him?"

"He knows you're here already," A third voice chimes in. Gaara's chakra no longer fills with bloodlust. It feels coarse like sand and wind. As it should be. "I've seen him before, he was in Suna when Kurama got me."

"Well *he's* the one who rescued me! And Kakashi...but Kakashi turned out to be a bad guy, so we had to ditch him!"

Izuna tilts his head just enough to see them through the tall grass. Hokori makes his way directly to Naruto, who helps him up onto his own shoulder. He looks...perfectly fine. Izuna didn't know what he had expected. Maybe Naruto would be sad, as his Naruto had been, when he saw all the destruction etched into broken walls and abandoned homes.

Fuu notices him a second later and shrieks, "He alive!" She screams and throws her kunai as if on instinct. Izuna curses and flips himself onto his feet to avoid it. It buries itself directly

where his head had been.

“Are you trying to kill me?” He flickers over to her and picks her up by an ankle. His foxes swarm around him with their mocking laughter. Naruto and Gaara both gasp and scramble up the low hanging branches.

“Put me down you fucking heathen!” Fuu shrieks at him, a second kunai appears in her hand and she swings it fruitlessly at him. Izuna throws her into the trees and she catches herself easily. “Are *you* trying to kill *me?!”*

“What? You rather I baby you?” Izuna scoffs, “That ain’t happening. If you wanna be babied, go to Kurama.”

“Kurama doesn’t baby us!” Naruto pipes up behind him. Gaara nods emphatically.

“Sure he doesn’t. Has he taught you anything yet?” Izuna says.

Naruto mulls it over for a second, “No! But he promised to show me those cool drawings that glow!”

“Sealing, Naruto. It’s called sealing.”

“I know that! I’m not an idiot!” Naruto refutes. Hokori yips in agreement.

Izuna’s mouth curls into a smile. “I know Naruto. You could be the greatest ninja alive.”

Chapter End Notes

Jiraiya has joined the mess, how sad! Idk, I think it'd be cool for future reasons but right now everything is just a mess. I rewrote this chapter sooo many times. I always struggle with like... turning points in the story. Like, everything is kind of set up in little arcs, and whenever the cast have completed their quest so to speak and I have to pick a new one for them to do its just like!! there are so many options!

I wanted so stuff with foxes because I feel like they've been sidelined for a second, and I refuse to let that happen!

Momentum

Chapter Notes

> I've got nothing to prepare y'all for this chapter, it's un-edited like usual, so enjoy the terrible grammar and spelling mistakes lol?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Uzushio?" The old man scoffs, "no one's gonna take you there." He's a wisened sailor, with a scruffy grey beard and arms laced with scars. Itachi thought that maybe he'd be willing. And when he offers him a large stack of ryo, he's still turned away. "Your money ain't worth it." And his eyes grew dark and sad, "death is certain."

Itachi deflates on the inside. He lets his hands clench into loose fists by his side. This is the fourth person he's spoken to. All of them adamantly refuse to take them across the ocean and to Uzushio. They all say the same thing.

"Uzushio? That place is cursed."

"Uzushio? The storm's are too bad."

"Uzushio? Ha! You have a death wish!"

"Nothing good comes from Uzushio."

"Why would you want to go to that haunted land?"

So Itachi bows slightly and excuses himself to go pester another weary traveler. This time, he aims younger, hoping for someone daring for an adventure, to throw caution to the wind. They could, in theory, buy their own boat and head over by themselves, and though Itachi and all the anbu learn as quick as they can, nothing could beat out the experience of someone who regularly traveled by boat, especially during a storm.

For the past few days—when he's not writing correspondence or periodically rotating through his watch shifts—he's been tracking down all the rumors he can about Izuna and Kurama. So far, he found out that they had walked out from the ocean like a glimmering beacon of yellow light. They had stopped by a ramen stand before they even had time to catch their breath, and Itachi wonders, belatedly, if it was Naruto who had insisted. Probably. He knows that whenever Naruto got his allowance, he'd first splurge on a bowl of ichiraku ramen.

They had stayed at an inn on the far side of town, but they left no traces behind save for a split in the wood from a kunai. They were last seen being pursued by Konoha anbu. Several fishermen had seen the battle in the waves, had seen how Izuna whirled to face them and had

seen the beautiful strike of lightning crash down on the water in the shape of a dragon. Later, when those same fishermen came ashore, they told the tale of a man wrapped in darkness that controlled the storm, who had fled in the wake of spirit foxes.

He wants, like he's never wanted before, to find Izuna. To wring the answers that he seeks out of him. He wants to know, so desperately that it burns like a pit of fire at the base of his lungs, how he knows Sasuke's name, and how he seems to know everything there is to know about everyone. And the inklings of something much greater, this truth that he's been clawing at ever since he first saw that man's face, start to creep up and seize hold of him. Itachi can barely focus on Naruto, not when Izuna looks at him with a face that mirrors his own. And he should know, he's studied his face with a sharingan. They're similar, because of course they would be. Uchiha through and through, but that wasn't it. *Too* similar was a thing. Hell, he didn't look much like his father, maybe a bit more like his mother, but the one person who shared his face, the only person he has seen who is *too* similar, is Sasuke. Or, at least he thought so.

Itachi is desperate, to say the least, not just to complete his mission like a good shinobi would, but for the selfish desire to make sense of his own mind, the one that Izuna had spiraled into chaos with a couple of words and a whorling, purple eye. So he continues down the pier, and he continues to ask, with his mask tucked away where no one can see it, so he looks like nothing more than a young teenager, polite and curious.

And finally, he hears more than just the standard whispers of haunted islands and impassable storms. He finds her on the last pier, looping thick ropes into a net. A middle aged woman, with dark garnet hair braided down her back, and sharp, dark eyes that glint purple in certain light. "Uzushio? What's there that you want, boy?" She asks, cocks her hip to one side. She wears an eyepatch. Her tunic covers her up to her neck. A huge, jagged scar peaks through, running up to the center of her left cheek. She's a trained warrior, through and through. But no hitai-ate, though that meant shit where they were at the moment.

She looks him up and down, notices pretty quickly that he's not just some kid, and she scoffs at him. "Wanting to go raiding the old crypts for your village, do you?" Itachi opens his mouth to correct her, but she plows ahead, "Where's you three-man cell? Or are you above all that?" To herself she mumbles, "you're young, what a pity."

"We're not looking for crypts or raiding," Itachi finally says, "You could take us across the sea though?"

The woman's scowl creeps up into something between a grimace and a smirk. "And what will these fine shinobi do once they're on Uzushio's beach?" She leans forward. Her hands still their work as she glares down at him. Itachi does not react in the slightest. His eyes are better, sharper, more dangerous than hers. But he's not cocky either, he watches carefully where her hands are placed in her lap, takes in where she could be hiding any weapons.

"We are looking for some people. They ran out into the ocean, and are heading towards Uzushio. They took...something...from us, and we have to get it back." He internally curses his use of his own words, but it better be left unsaid that the something was a jinchuuriki child.

She blinks, a microexpression of surprise before it falls into mockery, “Well!” She slaps her knee, loudly, enough to startle Itachi out of their staring contest, “then they’re dead!”

“They are not.” Itachi insists.

She glares at him, “No one survives that storm, and even if they did, they can’t pass through to the other side.”

That piques Itachi’s interest. “Why is that?”

The woman waves her hand. “I’ve been watching you creep up on every sailor on this pier. They’ve told you. It’s haunted. It’s cursed. It’s protected by the ghosts of the dead Uzumaki.”

“Barrier seals,” Itachi says. The woman laughs. Itachi dreads, suddenly. Kurama knows sealing. Izuna knows sealing. If they had the key to Uzushio’s barriers, then how the hell could they follow them? “Can *you* get through them? You’re a descendant from the Uzumaki clan, aren’t you?”

She blinks. “Those are some sharp eyes, *Uchiha.”* Itachi smiles, ever so slightly. The woman stands and tosses her net into a pile by the side of what Itachi assumes is her ship. It’s not that big, but much bigger than a standard fishing vessel. “But no. I haven’t been able to since they restarted a couple of months ago.”

When everything went wrong. When Danzo was killed. When Izuna showed up in Wind Country, and then...and then… It felt terribly coincidental. A truly unfortunate series of events.

“What’s your name, if you don’t mind me asking?” Itachi says.

“Nothing worth knowing. We’re not friends, kid. And I don’t want your name either, you seem like the type to be dead much too soon.”

“Alright Uzumaki-san. If you can take us through the storm, we’ll pay you handsomely.”

“Now, that’s the spirit, kid,” The Uzumaki grins wickedly. It’s nothing like Naruto’s, nothing like Kurama’s, nothing like Izuna’s. She has her own version of a bastard smile. “I can get you there, but I can’t get you through, good enough?” She holds out her hand, Itachi stares at it for a good long while.

“Good enough.” He says, and shakes her hand.

“We depart tomorrow morning. Once the sun peeks over that ocean, I’m gone. Anyone who is late is left behind, got it?”

“Yes. There are...a lot of us, if that’s alright?”

“I charge by the person,” She says quickly, grin turning more wicked by the second. Itachi nods, he can’t get a better deal. Well, he supposes he could, with a bit of genjutsu, but that feels...wrong. And she could also leave them stranded out in the middle of the ocean with no way back if she found out.

“I will inform everyone. We will be here. Tomorrow. Before sunrise.” Itachi confirms. The woman shoes him away, and he goes. He bounds over rooftops, and the churning in his gut settles for once. He’s been anxious and he never realised it. Anxious to get moving again, because once he stops there’s too much time to think. To move is to be blissfully unaware of consequence. To stop to feel it all at once. Every action over analysed, every step feeling like the wrong one to take. A moment in the moment is nothing more than that. A moment in hindsight is a monumental occasion. Itachi keeps going, on foot in front of the other, and he shuts off the part of him that worries that he’s wrong.

He thinks he knows he’s wrong. But he can’t stop, momentum be damned.

And when he reaches their rooms, the whole second floor of an inn on the far side of the village, he can barely think about rights and wrongs. All he knows is they have a goal again, just on the horizon. Just through a storm.

“I got us a ship,” He says when he settles down in front of Shisui, Kakashi, and Jiraiya. There is a small platter with a bottle of sake and one single cup in front of Jiraiya, who peers up at him from the top of his journal—the one he’s been scribbling in ever since he saw Karasu. Speaking of which, the bastard fox is sitting like a sentinel next to Kakashi. Itachi has too many suspicions about that. More things to think about, to fit together in the massive, jumbled puzzle that is Izuna’s existence. He doesn’t understand how, exactly, Kakashi fits into all of this mess, only that in the short few weeks Izuna and him had traveled together, Izuna had gotten unreasonably attached.

Itachi would find it funny if it were any other situation. Now, it causes suspicion between them and Kakashi. More so, the rest of the anbu who weren’t always on Kakashi’s squad, who didn’t know that he was as loyal as a dog to Konoha, those who still called him friend killer, and even those Uchiha who still believed he had stolen his eye from Obito.

“I met an Uzumaki,” He continues, and *that* catches everyone off guard. All eyes turn to him, rapt at attention as he recounts the things the woman had said, and—most—of the conclusions he’s come to with all the rumors about Uzushio and *demons* and *foxes*.

“I know a good deal of sealing,” Jiraiya says, “I’ve been to Uzushio. Once. I never would’ve thought that the barriers remained active even after the fall. And you’re saying that this Uzumaki could continue to get through, until a few months ago?”

“Yes.”

Jiriaya mulls this over. “Kurama Uzumaki… could he have reenacted it somehow, tailored it to him instead of Uzumaki in general?” He shrugs good naturedly, “It’s hard to say with old seals from that place. Legend goes that it’s been haunted ever since the fall.”

“Shinobi shouldn’t believe in old rumors like that,” Shisui says.

“Ah yes! But wise old fools do!” Jiryia downs his sake while the rest of them puzzle over what ‘wise old fools’ really means. *How could you be wise and a fool at the same time?*

“Regardless, we should send the fox back to his master, shouldn’t we?” Jiraiya holds his hand out to Karasu, but the fox doesn’t react besides blink at him with those mirrored eyes of his.

“We’re announcing our arrival?” Shisui asks, disbelieving.

“Fighting clearly won’t work,” Jiyaiya says, “All your anbu can’t defeat Izuna. What happens when it's both of them, and whatever other horrors they have cooped up on that island.”

“But...we have you now! You’re one of the legendary sannin!”

Jiyaya laughs at him outright. “Ah, that is flattering that you think I’d be more help than hindrance. And oh to be like you, only fixating on the battle ahead. You’re smart Shisui, I know you are. We don’t want to fight if we can help it. What would Naruto think, when he sees us bust down the walls of his ancestral home, and murder the only man who shares his name? And what a loss would it be, for Izuna to turn against us?” Jiriaya pours himself another serving of sake and sips at it this time. The rest of the anbu didn’t dare touch it, too on edge, too wired, too controlled by the threat of attack to let their guards down for even a second.

He looks to Itachi over the lip of the cup, “and I want to speak to him about that eye you saw, and all those red-clouded bastards he says he hunts. And I’m sure the two of you have many burning questions for your fellow clan member.”

“He is not one of us,” Itachi says, and he doesn’t mean it in the slightest. Shisui knows. Kakashi knows. And worst of all, Jiraiya doesn’t take his words with a lick of seriousness. His old eyes wrinkle in the corners as he grins.

“Sure. Then we shall have a chat, and we will talk about things before they get bloody.”

Itachi has a creeping thought, a thought like no other. He glances quickly at Shisui, then away again. Everyone saw it, but he’s not being subtle here. It’s not like they could know, either, what he’s thinking with simply a look, besides Shisui, who glares right back, asking *What do you want? What are you thinking?* At the same time. Itachi points at his own eye and then signs for four and red. Shisui knows then what he’s trying to say. He shakes his head. Itachi disagrees with him.

“Shisui could stop them.” He says. This is bigger than Uchiha secrets. And it wouldn’t be before long that everyone knows about what kind of eyes Shisui possesses. Danzo had known. The hokage knows. Kakashi was always suspicious, and he probably understands, to a certain degree, with him covetting his own spiral eye, that there is always more to the sharingan than what people assume.

Shisui hisses at him, but Itachi silences his older cousin with a mighty glare, enough to have him cowering despite their rank, despite the fact that this mission is Shisui’s, and he has the right as captain to pull Itachi from the mission just for this. “Kotoamatsukami can make them believe something so thoroughly that they follow through on it. To them, it feels as if it's their own desire, instead of a command being forced upon them.”

“That could work,” Jiriaya raises his eyebrows, “this would have been good to mention before.”

“No, it’s not that viable of a solution.” Shisui waves them all away. He glances angrily at Itachi. “I can only use it once every twelve years. I’d prefer if it were used in only the utmost threatening situations. And though I have my grievances with this batshit insane plan,” he looks at Kakashi, “if you’re *certain* they won’t incinerate us on the spot, then I have no reason to use this on them. There are bigger fish to fry than just these two, despite what it feels like at the present moment.”

“Oh *ho* I like this kid! You’re right! Trifling with jinchuuriki feels like a big deal, and perhaps it is to a certain degree, if you want to think about it *politically,* but in the grand scheme of things, the kid is safe, and in hands that don’t wish to harm or use his power, if I’m understanding this correctly.”

“That is if you choose to believe them.” Itachi points out.

“Well, you tell me, I hear you spoke with Izuna in his own mind. That is how you caught a glimpse of his eye, and that’s why this means so much to you, isn’t it? Because he said something and now you’re hooked, just like the rest of us, and want to unravel the mystery of Izuna Uchiha.”

Itachi opens his mouth. He closes it. Never before has anyone picked him apart so perfectly. “Well?” Jiryaiya prods when he doesn’t respond for a while, “do you believe him?”

Consciously, he knows he shouldn’t. Izuna could be the best liar in the world, or the worst. The line was as thin as spider’s thread. Subconsciously, something tells him that yes, Izuna was as safe as any shinobi could be, safe in the way that Itachi is sure that he wouldn’t kill in cold blood, that he wouldn’t kill unless the person *really* deserved it, and that he wouldn’t kill them. Because technically, he’s already proven that.

Itachi sighs, longsuffering and slow. “Yeah, I do.”

Shisui sputters, looking more defeated as the seconds tick by. Kakashi drags a hand down his face. Jiryia leans back with a smug grin.

* * *

He meets Yugito by the river, with her kunai out and pinning fish into the rocks, then flicking them upward with practiced eases onto the banks. Gaara skips right over to her and grabs hold of the edge of her loose pants. She doesn’t seem to mind, hell, she doesn’t flinch at all. Naruto and Fuu also run up to her, but they don’t touch her, even as she turns from the river to smile down at them.

When she senses Izuna, she flinches back a little bit. Her chakra flares defensively—blue and black and swirling in misty clouds around her—and automatically goes to grab Naruto and

Fuu, as if she could shield the other two behind her, even when she stands not much taller than them in the first place.

“You’re the one Kurama talks about, aren’t you?” She says. Her keen eyes dart to Aka, then back to him. She squints suspiciously.

“Good things, I hope.”

“He calls you a bastard.”

Izuna sighs, long suffering. “Fair enough.”

Yugito looks at him warily. All her movements are calculated and smooth. From the way she tilts her head to the poise of her torso and the stance of her feet. She has none of the clumsy grace of Fuu, or the sunny disposition of Naruto, or the shy, distracted nature of Gaara. She stands before him like he’s nothing but another challenge to conquer. She’s a shinobi through and through.

Curiously, Izuna takes a careful step forward, watches as she steps back, as graceful as a cat, just like her bijuu.

Naruto ruins the moment, or perhaps he saves Izuna from being attacked by this tiny shinobi. “Izuna is going to train us!” He shouts with wild, untamed glee.

“I am?” Izuna straightens up. He never agreed to this, did he?

“You taught Fuu a fireball jutsu, didn’t you?” Naruto bounds over to him and pulls on the hem of his shirt. “You know loads of cool things! Teach me how to make a portal!”

“You can make portals?” Yugito says, warily. Izuna looks up to her and nods his head once. She remains quiet for a second, then, “Matatabi thinks your eyes are evil.”

“That’s because they can be.”

“How so?” And suddenly she is not just a shinobi anymore. She’s curious, and young again, acting her age for once, and it’s a rare moment, one that Izuna can’t take away from her.

Izuna glances down at all the jinchuuriki. They need to know, for their own sake. So he pulls his bangs from his face. Naruto squeals in excitement, “That’s how he makes the portals!” He points excitedly.

“This eye is called a rinnegan,” Izuna starts, “And if you ever see your opponent with one...then you run away,” he tells them strictly, “the other people who have it are dangerous towards jinchuuriki specifically.”

Fuu and Naruto immediately start whining about how, no, they could fight off anyone! They start wrestling in the grass after and second, and gaara has to play referee and use his sand to separate the two. That is, until Naruto convinces Gaara to join his side, because Fuu is older and knows more jutsu than they do—she knows one, and can’t perform it properly. All the while, Yugito watches them. Izuna studies this girl before him, and he wonders if this is what

he looked like at her age. Because she looks grave, and she looks tired, and she looks like the world had taken everything from her.

“When did you leave your village?” Izuna asks her, and her eyes snap to him with enough fury to kill a kage.

“Last year.” She spits her words like venom. “I was twelve.”

Izuna clenches his teeth. Inexplicable grief swells in his chest. And for once in his pathetic life, the grief is not for him. “Where did you go?”

Yugito sticks her nose up in the air. “Matatabi likes to run, so we ran.”

“You didn’t stop, did you.” It’s not a question. Yugito doesn’t answer him. “Until Kurama came calling?”

Her defensive stance loosens at his name. “Until Kurama came calling,” she confirms.

They stand there as the river flows, as the sun shines, as the trees rustle in a faint autumn breeze. Clouds come and go and they don’t say a word. Izuna can only think of himself. Twelve, impossibly angry, impossibly kind-of happy when he forgot about his reason for living, and just lived instead. “Why did you leave?” He asks, because he has to know, for himself, that she’s not making a mistake.

She squints at him. “All my life I’ve been training to be a shinobi. All my life I hear the same things. That I should be grateful to be alive, that I should feel lucky that I was chosen, that I was gifted, that I was *special.* All my life I’ve had masked men following me in the shadows of my own home, and all my life I’ve had senseis and kages breathing down my neck to perform to those standards. To say that I’m a shinobi gives me pride. And it’s also my prison.”

She glances down into the river and spears a fish with a deft throw of her kunai. She reels it back in with invisible wire, “When Matatabi first spoke to me, they said…’why do you fight for this village? Why do you lock yourself up in a cage?’” Her eyes grow misty at the memory. When she speaks next, it’s deeper, layered with a creature of raw power. Matatabi speaks with her, to Izuna, and he can feel their voices rattling his bones. “‘If I weren’t stuck in here, I’d be running on the mountain tops. Run for me. Run until your legs turn to dust, and then run some more.’”

When she blinks again, her voice returns to normal, “And then I did, and once you start, it’s so hard to stop. It’s hard to think when you’re running unless someone else pulls you out. Kurama got us out.”

Izuna doesn’t know what to make of the story. It strikes him, in the way that Kurama does, how different jinchuuriki are to him. And he guesses, intrinsically, they would be, because jinchuuriki are never, truly, alone.

Yugito glares at him. “Why do you ask, *Uchiha?”*

“I wanted to see if you’re like me.”

She hisses, “And? Am I?”

“Some of what you said sounds like me...but...no, not really.”

“Good,” She sniffs, and turns away from him to continue her fishing. She hands him a basket already full. “Be useful and take this to Kurama. I’m tired of cooking.”

“Yes sir,” He says mockingly as he takes the basket. He body flickers away just as Yugito whirls around and tries to slash his knee caps. In the safety of the trees, he watches as Naruto, Fuu, and Gaara all wander back into the clearing asking about him, and when Yugito tells them to go play somewhere else, Gaara sweeps her up in his sand and throws her into the water. The fight that ensues, to say the least, was chaotic.

Izuna smiles, he hasn’t smiled like this for so long, but as he watches, it feels...okay.

He feels okay.

It’s the best he can hope for at this moment in time. He leaves them to their own devices and flares out his senses to locate Kurama. Uzushio isn’t large, so it takes only a few second for him to find that blistering chakra and for him to zero in. Kurama is the library. Which was…a quick souring of his good mood, and for a second his pauses just on the edge of the forest to look down at the rubble of Uzushio. He almost turns back, almost seeks out the river again to lay in the grass and soak up the sun and quiet bird song and rustling leaves. But he continues forward. Forward is the only way.

The library is most like an underground vault. Buried deep within the center city, with only one entrance. The entrance, though hidden, was also grand in design. The seals etched into the walls kept the whole ground intact, They glowed now, violent red and black, nothing like the yellows and blues and purples they were before. *Pure kyuubi chakra,* Izuna thinks, just as he puts his hand on the grand wooden doors and his skin prickles and sears. He pushes them and they don’t move. He puts his whole weight on the door, burning his arm and shoulder and half his torso. With a hiss, he leaps away.

The first time around, Izuna had an extremely difficult time entering most of the important locations in Uzushio. Where Naruto had walked right through, he’d always be thrown back. Now, they’d have to add Izuna’s chakra into all the fucking barrier seals litered about. Again.

“Kurama!” He shouts, drawing up the most annoying tone he can, “Kurraaaamaaa!”

It takes a couple of tries, until he hears a crash and an inhuman snarl. There’s a quick patter of stomping feet, and then Kurama shoots out of the library and nearly smacks him with the doors. “What do you want?! You’re acting more like a brat than usual, which is rare for the likes of *you!* I expect the fucking ten year olds to go be whining!”

Izuna passes him Yugito’s catch, “The *brats* told me to tell you that they’re sick of cooking. You do it.”

Kurama looks down at the basket, then shoves it back at him, “You do it.”

“No, I’m too tired.” He passes it back.

They nearly drop it when neither takes it, eventually, Kurama relents, but not without a sneer. “Oh, I didn’t know the great *Sasuke Uchiha* got tired.”

“Well I’m not Sasuke anymore, so try again. And fine, I’m better at cooking than you are anyway!” He rips it out of Kurama’s grip, fully expecting a retaliation. *This is how it is, isn’t it? I say I’ll do it because I’m better and then-*

“Yeah, you are, so you do it.”

Izuna stares at him. Did he hear that right? “There is no way you just said that.” His heart stutters to a stop. This was not how this works.

“What? I’m not gonna fall for that! How many times do I have to tell you that I’m not-” he stops, then starts again, “-competitive,” Izuna knows what he was going to say regardless. “Just cook the fucking fish. There’s wild vegetables and mushrooms going all over the island.”

“I’m aware.”

“Then leave.”

“What are you working on?” Izuna puts the basket by the door and tries and fails to enter. Kurama barks a laugh. “Let me in, damnit.”

“No.”

“Are you kidding me? You have to add me to the seals either way, this is the easiest way to do that!”

We can do that after we eat. Say, are you hungry? I am.”

Izuna punches him. Kurama turns just enough that it doesn’t land on his face and instead hits his shoulder. Izuna scoops up the fish basket. “Fine! Be that way, dobe!”

“Brat!

“Usuratonkachi!”

Both of them pause. Kurama is the first to step away. “Nope,” he says, “we’re not doing this.” Izuna’s brain lags, then catches up with himself, and suddenly there’s a thousand different things he’s thinking, and somehow, everything is sharp and painful in his lungs. He can see, so clearly, Naruto is here, standing in front of him, and it all feels too familiar, it all feels too much like the same. Is there so things as *too similar?* Because the face he sees, why can’t he get rid of it? Why, no matter how hard he tries, no matter how much he knows, why does he still see him? Izuna has the sudden and dramatic urge to fling himself into the sea and

drown. Whatever it is, he wants out of this place, filled with the happiest moments he's had, from that side and this side of time, to the worst, (from that side and this side of time).

"Whatever the hell your fucked up brain is thinking, stop it right now, got it?" Kurama glares at him.

Izuna passes him the basket, and Kurama takes it without a fuss. He turns slowly, his heart thundering in his chest. He sets his sight forward, because that's what he's supposed to do.

Izuna looks out to the other side—of what, he's not too sure—and he runs.

Chapter End Notes

Things happen boo hoo,
does anyone else get incredibly sad when thinking of the most resent Boruto events? you know...when...so and so...so and so's... Like I don't even watch Boruto and this is solidifying me NOT watching it, because haha. No. Reject canon, write fanfiction.

Real life stuff:
I woke up today and thought, hey, whats a good idea? How about a venti iced coffee, no food, and then going into my fucking jewelry class where we handle sharp saw blades, sharp scrap metal, and literal blowtorches? My hands were shaking so bad lmao. (Do you see where this is going? because I DIDN'T)

And (T/W: hand injuries?body horror?) You'd think that after slicing my middle finger on a saw blade I'd be a bit more careful but! Lo! I am a moron of the highest degree! and guess what hurts more than a saw blade? How about! Your hand!! Slipping from a file!! And your finger!! Going straight into the piece of metal you're working on!! With all your arm strength behind it!! Oh!! It's lovely!! :DDDDD And it's worse because its one of those like...sharp-but-not-cutting-like-sharp, but like... leaves a bit of skin hangin' around kinda sharp? Like it went IN but just kind stuck in there til I pulled him out! ohh it's so gross, and it's metal so its like, fuck, am I gonna die??? The saw blade one looked so much worse tho bc I was using it to cut metal so is has a lot of fine metal dust on it, and then, yoink, right into my finger lol. the cut was black before I washed it.

My hands have just gotten so abused this week haha. I'm altering this jacket for a cosplay for halloween, a lot of hand sewing aka stabbing myself with pins (and somehow the BACK end of a needle going under my skin?? like who tf said it could do that???)
and also early last week I was working with carving wax and I used a metal carving tool that I'd use my middle finger to push with and guess what? Finger tip has been numb for like two weeks!!

Nothing at All

Chapter Notes

> Hello!! Happy Halloween! I dressed up as Dabi from BNHA! which is also why I haven't uploaded anything for a bit because i was on that cosplay grind and I STILL procrastinated until the day before HA!
>
> Anyway enjoy this angst and fluff sandwich (the angst is the bread and the fluff is a single slice of cheese)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To give himself credit, Izuna makes it to the beach before he can even think of one, stupid little thought. His feet are heavy, still weighed down by chakra exhaustion, as he stomps down to where the waves meet land. His toes dig into the coarse sand. He found out forever ago that it was primarily made of shells and sea glass, though that hardly meant anything. Not when the grains are so tiny, broken down by the constant tumbling of the ocean until they are no longer themselves, but something else entirely.

Morning has come and gone in the time that he'd woken up, fought with Kurama, found the kids, talked to Yugito, and fought with Kurama again, though...he doesn't know what that last conversation had become. He shoves it away from his mind, breaks it down until it becomes nothing at all.

Izuna sits himself in the sand and watches the ocean roar around him. Even as the sun shines, dips itself into its afternoon stages, the water is dark and tumbling into a white churning mass. The maelstrom that Uzushio is so famous for endlessly rages along the horizon, inky and blotchy. Faintly, if Izuna squints enough, he can make out the first barrier; a slight reddish tint to the sky and clouds. It shimmers and flickers, exactly like it had been those months ago, and nothing like it all at the same time.

Izuna drawls in a long, shaky breath. He fills his lungs with the salty sea breeze, then exhales just as slow. His hands find themselves buried in the sand. Just below the scorching sun-baked surface, it's cool and damp. He digs his hands in and scrunches sand between his fingers like a kid.

"Naruto," He whispers to the wind, "Why did you save me?" It hurts down to his bones to breath that stupid question to life, to have it finally out in the world, when it's been churning throug hhis head all these months. "Why me?" A mantra, rapidly dancing through his brain, scorching over all his memories. The self pity of it, of all of it, eats away at his insides.

He hates himself, doesn't he?

He knows the answer. Knows it so well that it burns through his lungs, eats away the oxygen, and builds up in the back of his throat. He tilts his head back to look at the sky. There are no clouds, and the sun is just out of reach. All he sees is the vast expanse of blue. “The sky is really blue today,” He says, “I’m tired of looking at it.”

And that’s it, isn’t it. He’s tired. He’s been tired for years and he’s only 20-ish, fresh out into the world and he wants to quit. He wants to roll up and die somewhere, preferably buried underground so he doesn’t have to see the wretched blue of the sky ever again. “If you were here, all the world’s problems would just...you’d know how to fix it, better than I could, at least. And Kurama wouldn’t be out, running on ideas and hatred. I never got you to stop once something’s in your head, how am I supposed to get him to stop? He’s gonna destroy everything at this point and I’d help him do it…”

He watches the sun from the corner of his eye make its way lower and lower. The sky starts to bleed. It turns a blushing pink and then a violent red, and Izuna shuts his eyes. He lets darkness envelope him, and he tries not to think of everything he sees behind them. He tries not to think of Naruto, and of course that fails. He tries to think farther back, but everything is red. Sunset colors dart in blotchy flashes, red patches of blood splattered across his memories. Everything he’s seen without a sharingan is like a haze in his brain. He can’t make out what the colors are supposed to be.

He can’t remember anything else.

There’s the sharp smell of ash and embers and a quick zap of lightning scattering across his skin. Izuna peels an eye open only to be met by Karasu’s glassy black ones. He can see his reflection in its mirrored surface. He uncurls from himself, his limbs stiff as boards, his neck cricks and his shoulders cracks. Karasu tilts his head. His ears flatten and his tails thrash excitedly. In his mouth is a green scroll, rolled and sealed and stamped with a konoha leaf. Izuna sighs, the disappointment dragging at his very core.

He holds out his hand, and Karasu pads over and obediently places it there. He feels, suddenly, something else dropping into the palm of his hand, and it sends another jolt through him, another lightning bolt under his skin, rattling through his bones. Izuna rips his hand back and stares, dumbfounded, at the piece of paper tucked so perfectly behind the scroll. It’s tiny, folded and rolled tightly with a seal etched into its seam.

Izuna puts Konoha’s scrolls down into the sand, he barely notices it when it starts to roll away. Karasu juts a paw out to stop its descent into the sea. Those words, the words of a Kage, of Konoha itself, should be more important. They should be everything to him. His mission relies on those words, all their futures rely on those words, and they pale in comparison to whatever madness clings to him and why *these words matter more.* Izuna barely hears the fox’s annoyed growl at him, and he barely feels the wind that whips up along the beach, or that the last rays of light were slowly fading, being eaten up by the sea.

He grips the tiny paper with both hands, glaring at it like it was the cause of all his problems. He doesn’t realize that he’s trembling until his teeth are clenched so tight that his jaw starts to hurt, or that his fingers are clamped like vices and they start to tear the seal apart. He blinks, and forces all his muscles to relax. He looks to Karasu, who blinks at him owlishly. “I’m hopeless, aren’t I?” He has enough humor left to laugh at himself.

Izuna breaks the seal, rolls out the paper, watches it crinkle under his fingers. He stops before he can unfold it. Before he can read it. Does he want an answer, to whatever it was he'd said last time? Or does he want to wait until he's not emotionally and physically drained? No, doesn't, because one thing that could not be trained out of him was his impatience. He rips it open like ripping off a bandaid.

There, in the middle of the page, is one sentence. Even without a sharingan, the words sear themselves into the backs of his eyelids, like the impression of a sun in the darkness.

I'm holding you to your promises, Izuna Uchiha.

It's all Kakashi has to say to him, and it's all he needs to say. He didn't know what to expect, but this...this is just like him, isn't it? He'd get no long winded poetry from Kakashi, and Izuna would probably hate it if he did. No explanation or extra words. No fluff around the edges. Kakashi says what he means, and that's all he needs. That's all Izuna could hope for. Even in these tiny moments, inconsequential, nothing but letters on a paper that burns under his fingers, Kakashi keeps up his guard. He's not like Izuna, who pours out his soul to the first person who gives him attention. Kakashi's better at being a shinobi than he ever could be, in this world or the last.

A laugh bubbles out of his lungs as the paper burns. His entire being seems to lift, to float away along with the ashes of those words, and they too eventually all wink out of existence.

He stares at his empty hand until Karasu bats the other scroll closer. He scratches at Izuna's pant leg until he looks down at the fox. "Right," He mutters to him, "This is infinitely more important, isn't it?" Karasu nods his head in agreement.

Izuna puts the seal off the scroll, and waits for it to explode or something. When it doesn't, he rolls it open and begins to read.

* * *

He finds them eating around a huge bonfire in the middle of Uzushio's old marketplace square. The roads here were nearly saved, overgrown along the edges and dandelions poked through the cracks in the concrete. Young trees hung over in the broken down houses along either side, with a wealth of vines drooping down. Izuna first sees his foxes among the ruins, leaving and dancing and screaming. He hears Naruto laughing, watches as he chases after Gin and Yuki, both with smoking, blackened fish in their mouths.

Around the firepit are a few old chairs, a small mossy log, and an old couch with three massive rips down the front cushions. Yugito sits on one half, while the other is piled up with foxes. Unsurprisingly, the smell of cooking food brought out the local wildlife. A ratty grey cat curls next to Yugito on the armrest. It eyes the foxes with suspicious curiosity. There's a raccoon that's getting entirely too close to Gaara for the kid's comfort. He keeps scooting farther down the log as it holds out its eerily human paws. Izuna swears he sees a wolf-dog peering at them from between two storefronts that are still intact.

Karasu bounds forward before him, alerting the rest of the group to his presence. Izuna nearly backs up behind a half-collapsed wall, but then Aka gets up from her spot next to the fire,

opens her mouth, and screams at him. Fuu and Yugito both whip around to stare at him. Gaara is too busy chasing after Naruto, who chases after the foxes.

Kurama is there as well, sticking his hands straight into the flames to adjust things instead of using a stick like a normal person. The sleeves of his haori are tied up to keep them from burning. “Have you finally stopped freaking out?” he says.

“He was freaking out?” Fuu asks, innocently, “What for? Is someone attacking us?” She runs up to him. Izuna flicks her forehead. “Ow!”

“I wasn’t freaking out,” Izuna waves her away. He walks over to the couch and his foxes scatter. When he sits down, Tama and Mimi leap back onto his legs. Kurome jumps onto his shoulder. He flicks the scroll between his fingers. Kurama squints at it. He looks from Karasu, who has joined the game of tag with Naruto, and back to him.

“Is that…?”

“Yes,” Izuna says, a bit smug. Finally, it seems, something is going right this time. “It appears Konoha is starting to understand the position we’re in, and more importantly, the position they’re in.” He tosses the scroll over the fire. Kurama catches it with ease. He picks at the edge with his claw. “They’re coming here. To talk.”

“Here?” Kurama hisses. “To *talk?* And you believe that?”

Izuna pauses to consider. On one hand, he does. He trusts Kakashi, and he trusts that Jiraiya wouldn’t do anything *too* stupid despite his demeanor. The Uchihas, on the other hand, could be a problem. But still—”Yes, I believe it.”

Kurama ponders this. He rolls the scroll between his hands, then unravels it to read over the words. Normally, Kurama would not even care about such things, but perhaps he’s actually finding his sense of responsibility. Afterall, this matter with the jinchuuriki is more about him than Izuna. There is only so much he can say and do before he steps on Kurama’s ideas, and he does that already by simply existing.

While Kurama reads, Fuu makes her way over to him and hands him a grilled fish stuck through on a black spike. “There’s plenty y’know,” She whispers to him, “Kurama told us you were sick, and sick people need to eat, right?”

“It’s chakra exhaustion,” Izuna mutters. He takes the food and thanks her with a slight dip to his head. When he sees her tense expression, he pokes her forehead. “You have Chomei, so you shouldn’t have to worry about that too much. But you should try to rely on your own chakra reserves as much as possible.”

Fuu tilts her head. “If I have her chakra, why shouldn’t I use it?”

Izuna shrugs. “would you move a pebble in the same way you move a boulder?”

She giggles, “I guess not...Then teach me to walk on water like you and Kurama! Even Yugito can do it and she’s barely older than me,” She whines.

Naruto catches wind of their conversation and leaps over Gin's head to launch himself at Izuna. "I want to learn that too! And portals!"

"I told you already, you can't make portals, that's a rinnegan specialty," Izuna bats them away as they start to crowd him, "Go learn the flying thunder god seals, that's the closest you'll get!"

"Flying...what gods now?" Naruto pulls back from trying to rip Izuna's hair out, "seals! Kurama keeps talking about seals! Are they cool?"

"As cool as foxes, kid," Izuna grunts as Fuu throws her kunai and it lands in the fire instead of his face, "Will you quit that!"

Fuu opens her mouth to reply when Kurama stands and a wave of his chakra causes all of them to stir. The foxes whine. Tama and mimi roll off the couch and skitter away. The cat curled next to Yugito darts back into the darkness with a hiss. The racoon sitting peacefully on the log scurries away, and the wolf-dog in the distance becomes nothing more than another shadow on the broken walls.

Izuna turns to him, sees Karasu curling himself up in the bonfire with a little bastard's smile on his face. Kurama narrows his eyes as he reads, and then he snaps his head up. His eyes soften when he sees the Jinchuuriki, all huddled up and looking at him with wild, curious eyes. When he sees Izuna, his face morphs from pure arodation to a scowl. Izuna bites his tongue to not spit something mean at him, though he'd totally deserve it.

Instead, he pretends that the disappointment churning in his gut is nothing but residual fear from his sudden spike of chakra and killing intent.

Kurama waves his claws at them. "It's getting late, you kits should be getting to bed soon." A chorus of complaints follow, even Izuna's foxes pick up on it and start howling when Naruto stomps his feet and whines.

"It's barely sundown-" Yugito starts to reason.

"Izuna was gonna teach us something cool!"

"I want to stay out-"

"That's not fair!"

Kurama jerks his chin at Izuna, "We need to talk about some things," Yugito gets the message first. Her posture straightens and she zeroes in on the scroll between Kurama's claws.

"Is it bad?"

Kurama reaches out and ruffles her hair, thoroughly messing up her braid. "No, nothing we can't handle," She seems to settle after that, "And I'm serious, the brats need to sleep."

"Okay…" Yugito drags her feet when she leaves. Gaara quickly stands to follow her. Fuu and Naruto take a bit more convincing, and a promise from Izuna that he'd show them a cool

jutsu at sunrise—so they *had* to sleep now or they might miss it. Finally, *finally,* it's just the two of them again, and all of Izuna's foxes. Karasu raises his head from the fire and snorts before he stands and stretches forward.

"Karasu told me something interesting," Kurama starts, voice grave, with that horrible bite to it that made everything he says sound as dangerous as the flames in his eyes.

Izuna remains quiet. Partly because he's nothing to say, and partly because if he *does* say something, it will most likely be scathing and stupid and not helpful at all. Instead, he watches how the shadows dance across that familiar face, and he thinks of all the things Karasu could have said. *Is it about Kakashi's letter?* He doesn't even know *why* he's hiding its existence from Kurama, but he does.

"Shisui's mangekyou," Those red eyes glint, Izuna's veins turn to ice, "It can make people believe anything. It's a problem and they might plan to use it, even though Shisui himself did not seem so keen."

Izuna is quick to understand his meaning. "Then we don't let him in. Just have Itachi, Kakashi, and Jiraiya."

"Itachi is more of a problem child than you ever were," Kurama snarks. Izuna lets his face fall flat. This must be unintentionally hilarious, because the next moment Kurama bursts out laughing. "You really want to talk to him that bad?"

"I'd rather get it over with…" Izuna rubs at the moon tattoo on his palm as he recalls his first conversation with his once brother. "I...wasn't very subtle with the kind of knowledge I know. I'm sure he's either on the verge of coming up with a conclusion, or he already has one. And if that's the case then-"

"Then it's better to talk him out of said conclusion."

Izuna opens his mouth, then closes it. Kurama raises an eyebrow. "Talking him out of it would only confirm it. Whatever he's thinking, I won't confirm nor deny his suspicions, whatever they are. He can go on wondering about me 'til the end of the world. Or maybe...he's not even thinking of me at all." Izuna scoffs at himself, "I'm not his mission, Naruto is."

Kurama's red eyes dance from his face to the flames, to just outside the reach of the fire's light, to his foxes, and back to his face. "And what about Kakashi? What's his place in all of this?"

"He's harmless, in the grand scheme of things."

Kurama snorts. "In the grand scheme of things, he set off almost everything."

Izuna's heart lurches at the thought. He should've kept his big mouth shut. He shouldn't have alluded to the fact that Kakashi had a part to play in all of the going-ons of the world. If Kakashi knew, he'd probably blame himself for all the shit that comes after. "But whatever, he's harmless to us, I suppose." Kurama stretches his arms over his head and yawns. His back

and shoulders crackle like the flames. He looks incredibly human. Izuna turns his attention to Aka, who has crept her way back to Izuna's feet. He buries his hands in his fur.

"And what kind of answer are you gonna give them, when they get here?" Izuna says. He concentrates on the black tips of Aka's ears rather than the searing mass of chakra burning right next to him.

"I'm not unreasonable," Kurama grumbles, Izuna chances a look in his direction just to level him with an unimpressed stare. Kurama clicks his tongue. "I'm not! I'll hear 'em out, and if I don't like what they say...well…" his grin is a bit too wide to be considered pleasant. It falls after a second. "But what the hell are *you* gonna do, hm? Itachi and Kakashi," He muses over their names, "you can't live here forever, can you?"

"I could," Izuna mutters. He had wanted to. Once. A lifetime ago. On the other side.

"No, I think you'd go crazy." Kurama says, and it lacks all of the bite it normally would. Those red eyes dim when Kurama looks at him, *really* looks at him. It makes Izuna's skin crawl like he's on fire. "I told you I won't push you away, but I'm also not going to tell you to stay."

Izuna sucks in a breath. He inhales smoke and ashes and the desire to hear Kurama ask him to stay. He buries that want deep under all his other undesirable, intrusive thoughts. He doesn't trust himself not to say something stupid, so he simply nods his head.

"But that doesn't mean you can go galavanting off to who knows where and completely cut yourself off from the rest of the world!" Kurama says alot in the span of an insult that's supposed to be a joke. And Izuna gets it loud and clear. *You can't abandon me. You can't abandon us.*

"I won't, I promise."

Kurama leans back and crosses his arms with a huff. "Dangerous words."

"Well I'm a dangerous person."

"I'll hold you to them, *Sasuke."*

"Don't call me that," Izuna snaps, "I'm not him anymore."

Kurama shakes his head. "You'll always be him."

Chapter End Notes

So yeah!! That's the chapter!! I have...surprisingly, very little thoughts about this one! Most chapters I either love it or hate it, but this I'm like...yeah, it's pretty good, but I'm not like, gushing over it??

Real life stuff:
Imagine my surprise when the tips of fingers are completely calloused from constantly bending wires into staples for my cosplay. Every. Single. Staple in Dabi's coat, pants, face, and hands i did individually. Very proud of how it turned out, and yet I still nearly fucking died of embarrassment trying to get out of my apartment. The elevator opens and its fucking packed with normal ass people. I had to walk in there and just...chill while we slowly descended. Once I got to the party I was goin to though,,, then it was bearable.

OH and my dumb friend I stfg imma kill this mf ON SIGHT... so I make this amazing cosplay, and I forget one thing; a plain white shirt. And I'm like, ok, I have friends, I can ask them. So I ask my roomates first and they were like, yeah maybe, but then it fell through so I asked my other friend. Abt an hour after I text him he's like yeah!! Sure!! So I'm like fucking reLIEVED and then, then this mf is so fucking hungover that he keeps ghosting me and Im like freaking out bc its getting closer and closer to when I have to go so I keep fuckin texting him and then hes like "nah i cant fucking move imma die" like. bruhhhh. T-T so I ended up just going binder out, and I was also wearing this like see-through thing that was part of my arms so i looked like dabi but a ~whore~

An Outsider Looking In

Chapter Notes

Helloooo It's been a bit! but here, a new chapter with some mild angst!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi leans over the rails of the ship, watching the waters swirl underneath him in a mass of seafoam blotches and black and blue. The storm swirls in a gale that's completely unnatural to someone with a trained eye. The clouds ripple with untamed, unbound chakra. Lightning crackles and thunder booms, raising the hairs on Kakashi's arms and making his already fluffy hair lift completely off his neck. And permanently hanging in the air is the taste of ash and dust despite all the rain and wind. Fire is what coats his tongue and scorches down his throat, making his mouth dry as bone.

They must be close if the air tastes like Kyuubi chakra.

The thought sends a nasty thrill through his spine. And he wonders, briefly, if Izuna got his note, or if that blasted fox accidentally swallowed it. Maybe he burnt it on purpose.

Their Uzumaki guide—who has yet to give up her name, she's still convinced they're all going to die—is high up in the crow's nest. One of her crew, a sturdy looking man with a short cropped beard and dozens upon dozens of un-hidden scars, mans the helm. He spins the wheel lazily every so often, looks up at Uzumaki-san with his single black eye, and continues on without a hitch.

It's been almost a full day of sea travel. As promised, they'd gotten up before sunrise and met her at the pier. Itachi had forked over all their left-over ryo, and she let seven of them aboard. The rest of the anbu had to, unfortunately, return back home. Kakashi would never expect money to be the driving factor that split up their forces, yet here they were, traveling at the mercy of an Uzumaki, to soon be at the mercy of *another,* infinitely more violent Uzumaki. Which, by Uzumaki standards, is an impressive feat.

"See anything yet?" Jiraiya comes up on his right and stares down into the same patch of ocean that Kakashi does. He shakes his head instead of responding. Jiraiya sighs and leans further on the rail. He looks completely relaxed compared to the rest of them. Shisui has been pacing along the deck for hours now, swinging kunai between his fingers idly. Itachi is perched at the very tip of the ship with his legs dangling off into the ocean. Three or four crows constantly fly off into the clouds. Most of them come back as heaps of smoking, lightning-struck feathers. It only heightens the sense of helplessness that slowly, slowly starts to crawl up Kakashi's throat. He can tell the others feel the same in the restless movements of the three anbu who try to pass the time playing dice games. They bet their ninja tools or their secrets. And even if they laugh it sounds forced.

Jiriaya, on the other hand, lounges around, writes in his journal below deck in one of the private rooms, and laughs whenever he comes up top to watch the storm. “It’s an impressive sight, isn’t it?”

“Has it always been like this?”

“Hell if I know,” Jiraiya scoffs, “I went to Uzushio once, a long time ago. When it was still a place and not just a ruin.”

Kakashi turns to him fully. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. Jiraiya side eyes him, then raises an eyebrow. “Eh. Not much information that could help. The whole place was filled with inactive seals and barriers. In the event of an invasion, they’re supposed to activate,” His face turns somber, as it does when he thinks of anything for more than a second. Kakashi sometimes forgets that Jiraiya is practically a legend, but when he lets that facade slip, it’s not hard to imagine at all. “And yet…” He mutters. It doesn’t need to be said out loud.

And yet...Uzushio fell. And Konoha was supposed to help it.

“Another failed promise from Konoha,” Jiraiya says instead, “They’ve racked up quite a few.”

“It’s all we can do to try,” Kakashi says quietly, almost meek in the face of the truth. “It’s all any of us can do.” *And yet….I call Izuna to uphold his promises when I’ve never done the same. When none of us have done the same.*

“Hmm…Kurama might not see it that way. He has a right to be angry with us. With all of us specifically. That is...if he knows who exactly Naruto’s parents are, and who exactly *we* are.”

“They know,” Kakashi says. It’s the one thing he’s confident in. Or, at least, Izuna knows who he is, and by extension he’ll probably know the rest of them too. Izuna has a way of just...knowing things that he probably shouldn’t, and he doubts Kurama is any different. “Somehow, Izuna just knows things.”

Jiraiya mumbles something incoherent to himself.

Kakashi digs through the pocket on his vest and produces the bell Izuna had given him. He remembers, briefly, that black eye glittering, his black hair flying around his face like he was the eye of a storm, the lightning that sounds like chidori racing on his skin. There was so much *knowing* in Izuna’s eye, and so much glee in that moment. Kakashi doesn’t know why it’s directed at him, of all people. It should be at Itachi, or Shisui, or someone from his own clan. If Izuna craved connection so much—and he does, Kakashi knows this much as well—then shouldn’t he gravitate towards them instead? Why him?

“Oh, the bell test,” Jiraiya points at it, “Minato made you do that too?”

Kakashi looks from the bell to him. “Yes...but this is Izuna’s. He keeps them on the end of his katana.” *His katana covered in memories. Why did he give me one?*

Jiraiya sputters. It's the first time he's been truly caught off guard. "Are you serious? How did you take that from him?"

Kakashi clenches the bell in his fist. "I didn't. He gave it to me."

"Really…" Jiraiya hums thoughtfully and strokes his chin. "That is *peculiar."* Despite the friendly, lackadaisical aura of Jiraiya, his eyes always seem a bit too calculating. Kakashi is about to ask him what he's thinking when the clouds above them split open. Everyone aboard the ship tilts their eyes upwards as golden sunlight streams down onto the desolate grey ocean.

And there, trotting down on a spiral of purple flames, is a black fox with two tails. The non-konoha crew gasps and gape as the creature descends. Itachi's crows start to flutter away, as if any one of them could be the next victim of Karasu's sharp fangs.

"And here comes the bringer of bad news, it seems," Jiraiya chuckles to himself, then he grabs Kakashi by the shoulders and shoves him forward, right into Karasu's path. Karasu growls at him as he pivots and lands clumsily on the deck.

"Why is it *always* him?" Shisui whines, "They could've sent a clone instead of their damn fox!"

"They're being cautious," Kakashi mutters to himself more than anything. He kneels next to Karasu. Instead of a scroll in his mouth, there's a tiny leaflet of paper, folded and held so gentle between his two front teeth. Karasu places it carefully in his palm when he holds his hand out.

Jiraiya. Itachi. Kakashi.

Follow Karasu.

It hits him all at once, just how close they are. To what, exactly, is indescribable. The end of something is near. Either a breaking point, or the mending of two halves. Kakashi wants to have hope that everything will go smoothly, but it won't. And it's happening, all of it. Right. Now.

And Shisui's not invited.

Kakashi looks up sharply to him, and Shisui flinches behind his mask. He gets up and hands the paper to Jiraiya, who's eyes also flicker between Itachi and Shisui.

"That's very specific of them." Jiraiya rubs his chin, "do you think they know about…" He dies off and looks at Karasu, "...does Karasu understand us?"

Kakashi's heart sinks. "Probably," he barely whispers, the guilt already clawing up his throat. He forgot. He forgot just how smart that fox is and now it cost them their one and only contingency plan if things turned sour. "If...if Shisui trailed behind, or perhaps he transforms into Itachi-"

Jiraiya scoffs, “Don’t fool yourself, there’s no way they’ll fall for that. Any tricks and we’ll never see Naruto again.”

“Am I not…?” Shisui takes a tiny step towards them, “I can’t go, can I?”

The paper is passed from one hand to the next until Itachi holds it, his sharingan whirling as if there is more to see. There’s not, Kakashi already checked. When Itachi’s done, he glances up to him and Jiraiya.

“This is…oddly specific.” Itachi gives the note back to Kakashi, but Karasu snatches it from the air and it ignites into pink and blue flames. They watch, stunned, as Karasu leaps off the boat and speeds through the air, a hovering purple shimmer that skims the ocean’s surface.

Kakashi’s heart lurches forward, but his feet stay firmly rooted to the spot. That is until Jiraiya sputters and vaults himself off the boat. “What are you waiting for?!” He shouts back at them as he high tails it after the black and purple blur, “We’re gonna lose him!”

Kakashi springs to life, and catches the tail end of Itachi’s words that he throws over his shoulder haphazardly to Shisui, “I’ll tell you everything, don’t worry. I’ll send a crow if I can-”

And then he’s next to Kakashi, and they’re somersaulting into the ocean, sending chakra to their feet. They hit the water and run after Jiraiya’s white haired pony tail, Karasu already lost in the rise and fall of the churning blue waves.

It takes a while for them to catch up as Karasu dashes like a streak of indigo across the horizon, thus Jiraiya keeps a breakneck speed. Kakashi realizes that they’re wasting chakra just to make sure they don’t lose sight of the fox, and fuck, it’s an incredibly effective way to make sure that they’re at least worn down by the time they come face-to-face with Izuna and Kurama. He curses Izuna, specifically, probably because he feels, on the edges of his soul, that it was his idea.

It takes them an hour and a half for the grey and bleak sky to turn a hazy red, and the air thickens with fire and ash that practically suffocates him. Every cell in his body tells him to turn away, but Karasu runs forward, head first through the barrier, and Kakashi nearly follows him straight through, but Jiraiaya holds out a fist to signal their stop.

Jiraiya tests the barrier with a kunai; it flies right through. He tries again with a chakra-covered shuriken. This time, it bounces back and nearly impales itself in Itachi’s arm. The kid’s quick though, he’s gone before it even scratches him.

Kakashi spots the lone figure first, and motions to get the other’s attention. The three of them grow silent as the man approaches. Kakashi tries to reach out his senses, but the barrier blocks it all. He can’t sense the chakra on him, but he call smell the fire and smoke and fox on the man.

It’s not Izuna.

"Kurama," He hisses quietly. Kakashi's taken aback by how *much* anger he harbors towards Kurama, but the last time he heard from this man, it was him telling Izuna to put him in a genjutsu because *he couldn't deal with him right now.* He took Naruto. He somehow got Izuna on his side. He was an Uzumaki. One of the last, and Kakashi could only be angry at him, because the other option was guilt. And guilt...he had enough of it to swallow him whole.

He looks for Izuna anyway. He scans the horizon behind Kurama, as if another black shadow will crest the waves. He checks the clouds; if Izuna decides to shoot them with another lighting dragon, or if he's hiding somewhere on purple flames with Karasu. But he's nowhere in sight. There's no flash of black cloaks or black hair or his onyx eye. No spinning sharingan or glinting blue-wrapped katana. There's no hint of foxes besides the monstrous man striding towards them at the pace of a predator stalking its prey.

Kurama reaches the barrier and runs his clawed hands across its orangey surface. It warps and bends around him, never touching. Kurama's eyes glare at them, at Jiraiya, but his mouth smiles. Or rather, he bares his fangs at them.

"Jiraiya," He says with contempt, "it's so glad to finally meet you." Kakashi can hear his voice rattling in his skull and he hates how it makes him want to run. Even Itachi inches closer to him, trying to get Jiraiya between himself and the man standing there, with no weapons, no armor, and...Kakashi notices he's not wearing shoes. Weird.

Jiraiya, ever the diplomat when it counts, gives it his all and smiles politely. "You must be Kurama Uzumaki."

The tension in the silence that follows is so thick Kakashi could cut it with a kunai. Kurama's eyebrow ticks upward, and despite him being a couple inches shorter than Kakashi and Jiraiya, he seems to look down at them, blood red eyes flickering between the three. "It appears I am."

"Where's Izuna?" Kakashi and Itachi blurt out at the same time.

Kurama's narrowed, fierce eyes shift completely. They gleam, suddenly, with amusement, the fox kind, that meant trouble for anyone else involved. Kakashi immediately is on his guard. "Ah, I see," He taps a clawed nail on his chin in thought. He looks them both over, pointedly avoiding any sharingan. "Hmm...last I saw he was buried under a pile of foxes," Kurama shrugs nonchalantly, "I don't know if he survived that to be honest."

Jiraiya leans over and whispers to Kakashi, "he's joking, right?"

"It appears he is." Kakashi mumbles back, half shocked that Kurama didn't immediately kill them.

"Will I ever get to meet this *wonderous* Izuna Uchiha or will he forever remain a shadow in my teammate's mind?"

"That depends on you three, I suppose," Kurama crosses his arms and sneers at them, "and Izuna himself." Suddenly, Kurama's attention snaps to Kakashi, "He likes to run away when

things get *too* emotional."

"I have no idea what you're insinuating-" Kakashi immediately takes the bait, like an idiot, he realizes, the second Kurama's sneer upturns into *that* look. That look that he's been seeing on Izuna. The one that just screams he knows more than he'll ever let on. It's practically identical. But on Kurama's features it looks more demonic.

"Oh," Kurama blinks at him innocently, "I'm not insinuating anything…"

"For fucks sake!" Jiraiya snaps, "We're here to see Naruto, not talk about Izuna's emotional constipation!"

Kurama bursts out into cackling laughter. He sounds too much like one of Izuna's foxes. Or...do the foxes sound like him? When he finally settles back down, he gives them all one more suspicious eye-down. "The moment you step through this barrier, no weapons of any kind will be drawn, do not place any seals or take anything from the island, if I see a hint of either of your sharingan, I'll rip it out myself, got that?"

Kurama goes through a flurry of hand signs before he places his palm on the barrier. This time, it shimmers and folds in on itself until a sliver of it opens to them. It's just wide enough for them to shimmy inside, single file. Kurama backs away from them as they enter, his body language the only hint of his hesitation and wariness. The barrier materializes just as Kakashi slips past.

As he reaches out his senses this time, he can feel Kurama's chakra. And it's...horrible. It's the kyuubi chakra, and he doesn't understand why in the slightest. Why does it cling to him like it runs through his veins? Why does he smell like a fox and not at all like a human?

"And of course, as long as you follow my rules, I won't attack you."

"Would Izuna let you kill us?" Kakashi asks, perhaps boldly, perhaps stupidly.

Kurama grins and shakes his head. "You're already a testament to that fact, brat," Kurama sets a comfortable pace across the waves. *He called me a brat?* "He wouldn't let me leave you bleeding in the snow for less than thirty minutes."

Kakashi's wandering thoughts come screeching to a halt. *"You* healed me?"

Kurama snorts, "Who else?"

Kakashi knew, he knew it, they all did. Itachi and him discussed it before, that it had to be Kurama or some other third party because Izuna doesn't know medical ninjutsu, but still. *Still.* Just to say it, so casually, just the fact Kurama *healed him.* As if he wasn't the enemy, as if he wasn't the one to pick the fight in the first place, as if Izuna hadn't looked him in the eye and knocked him out cold.

"Why?" Kakashi says to himself, but Kurama hears him anyway. Kakashi has his theories as to why Izuna can't seem to leave him alone. So many in fact that he drives himself insane at night trying to get them straight. Because it's never made much sense. The only thing he

knows is that he is, somehow, just another ghost in Izuna's mind. Whatever he's chasing, he won't find it in Kakashi. He's almost certain of that. And yet, that stupid Uchiha ended up burrowing himself into the minds of everyone he comes across, intentional of not.

"I won't speak for him," Kurama says, and it's perhaps the softest thing he's said so far, "but he's a wreck of a human being. And...maybe he just needs a friend."

"You're not friends?" Itachi says quietly as well.

"I can't be," Kurama looks back at him with something akin to a deep, unrelenting grief that sweeps over his features, as sure as the ocean's tide washing over the shore. And he grins with the same, horrible, lonely pain that Kakashi knows. That everyone here knows, but it's sharper on his face, like everything else. "He looks at me and sees someone else."

Kurama Uzumaki is a byproduct of his death.

It clicks in his head, another puzzle piece that barely fits. He's scraping together an image; the story of Izuna Uchiha, that slowly starts to unravel itself without names or faces, but just *events.* He wants to ask, so desperately, but he also knows that he shouldn't. He should wait for Izuna to tell him, because Izuna won't talk if he asks. It's the first thing he learned about that stubborn Uchiha. *Wait, watch, listen, and he'll talk.*

It takes a while for anyone to speak again. "We're coming up on the second barrier," Kurama says in the dead quiet that persists. He aims his next bout of chatter at Jiraiya, who happily breaks the silence. Strangely enough, they topically avoid the reason for their meeting in the first place. Jiraiya starts spewing about seal work and barriers and the marvels of Uzumaki, and Kurama nods and grunts and hisses on occasion. He doesn't seem to take any of the praise that's given. Not when Jiraiya compliments Uzumaki seals for their elegance and brilliance. Not when he admits that raising this many barriers—as they come upon the *third,* then *fourth,* then *fifth*— is an impressive feat in itself. Not when he asks about how on earth he figured out the age-old secrets to Uzushio's heart; the perpetual storm that wards off unwanted intruders. All of it, Kurama takes and gives back a neutral expression. Not a smug grin or a satisfied chuckle. He blinks at Jiraiya languidly and says, "they've always been here, all it needed was a little kick-start"

"A kick start of a chakra pool the size of a village!" Jiraiya huffs, "how much chakra do these barriers consume daily?"

"They're self-sustaining." Kurama waves him off, and Kakashi can tell he's starting to get testy with his answers. "If that's all, we're almost through."

They all look up as they crest the last few waves, and *there.* Kakashi sucks in a breath when he sees the island for the first time. It's...peaceful. The storm is fully kept away by the last barrier. The waves turn from deep inky blue to a pure turquoise within a few steps of the barrier. And as Kurama opens the seals, a gust of warm, tropical air smacks all the cold from Kakashi's bones. He sighs deeply. Just the air around the island settles something in his bones.

He lets it calm him for just a second before he remembers just who is in their company. Jiraiya whistles low. “Now *this* is a vacation spot! No wonder Naruto doesn’t want to leave!”

Itachi and Kakashi physically wince as Kurama’s chakra slams into them like a slap to the face. Jiraiya seems completely oblivious to how the red man seethes from just to his right.

As they reach solid ground, Kakashi’s legs nearly give out. He’d forgotten just how tiring it could be to constantly keep changing chakra output to stay on top of the turbulent seas. He doesn’t let anyone see his moment of weakness, and he gathers himself up mentally as well. Izuna is *here.* He’s *close.*

Kakashi’s not exactly a sensor type, but even he can feel the trace of Izuna’s chakra around. On this very beach. He looks around but there’s nothing but sand and grass and trees. No Izuna. He stretches out his other senses as well. He listens to the quiet rustling of trees in the breeze, the shuffling of feet as they trudge up the beach, he smells the salt and warm air and *lots* of fox and a bit of cat as well.

It’s not long before they start coming across ruins. The remains of a once great village start cropping up in the broken stone paths, the marked trees and fenced areas, then the fallen trees and patches of arranged stones. Then they’re suddenly there, overlooking a broken civilization on the crest of a hill.

Jiraiya stops and gapes down at the village ruins. Kakashi doesn’t blame him. They span out towards the sea, a vast network of stone foundations and half-burnt timber buildings that radiate from a couple central locations. Colorful cloth, old worn away banners and brightly painted stones remain, clinging to the desperate edge of a living village.

Uzushio, even in this decaying state, is stunning.

Kakashi’s eyes zero in on movement to his left. His heart thunders in his chest. On another hill, in the overgrown grass in front of a large house, is Naruto. Kakashi watches, too stunned to speak, to think, to move, as that bright little kid runs over to something hidden in the tall weeds. A second later, a figure sits up.

Izuna looks at Naruto and smiles.

Chapter End Notes

I love comments that are like "I can't wait to see where to author takes this!" Like lmao ME TOO AND I'M THE AUTHOR HAHA!

Writing this chapter was so incredibly hard and for what?? Idk, I wanted Jiraiya in the story but I'm sooo fuking reluctant to make him lik his canon character, so he's just

really OOC all the damn time, but fuck, I can't write the pervert shit I just canT! I can barely write innuendos without cringing into infinity lmaooo Im dying here

Some people were concerned about my hands bc I kept mentioning getting injuries but baeby thats life! Don't worry too much its never anything too serious, just a bit annoying,,,, finals are coming up so that's why this one took me so long, not to mention a disgusting bout of writers and art block, absolutely stunned my progress, also I have been fucking GAMING instead of literally anything else lol

The Children

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is like, twice as long as the normal ones, 6.7k! I think the only other chapter that reaches a 6k word count was ch. 12?
>
> Enjoy the chaos!
>
> (ALSO??? 100K WORD COUNT WHAT???)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuna spots a head of silver hair just over Naruto's shoulder and his entire body freezes up. One minute, he's staring at Naruto's smiling face, feeling the heaviness in his chest lift, and the next he's staring into a startled greyish eye and a half covered face and reality comes back to him full force. Izuna gets up with much protest to the furry creatures weighing his legs down.

"Hey, where're you going?" Naruto tugs at the hem of his cloak as he dusts himself off.

"Away for a second-" Izuna readies himself to turn tail and run, but before he can make his grand escape, a hand snatches the collar of his cloak and he's tugged back down.

"Oh, no you don't!" A Kurama clone growls down at him, "you wanted this mess, now you're gonna be there to help sort it out!"

Izuna grumbles and debates the merits of popping this clone and hightailing it for the forest, but he doesn't. Within a second, all the primal desires to *get the fuck away* dissipate and Izuna shuts down completely. He crosses his arms and allows himself to be dragged, neither helping nor hindering the clone's efforts, to his inevitable doom.

Naruto giggles and skips beside him. "Kurama's stronger than you, isn't he?"

"He is not," Izuna denies vehemently, "I'm simply allowing this." The hand on his collar tightens minutely.

Those blue eyes glitter. It hurts but not in the sharp, painful way that looking at Kurama causes sometimes. This is like a dull ache between his head and heart. Izuna doesn't look away. He'll *never* look away. "You're reflecting, aren't you?"

"Who taught you what that means?"

"Yugito," Naruto cackles, "She says you reflect a lot of things! You're like a mirror!"

“I could mirror your chakra and send it right back at you!” Izuna hisses without any bite and makes a fake lunge towards the kid. Naruto scampers away with a gleeful shriek, nearly bowling over Aka who has dutifully followed them down the hill and into the village proper.

Izuna sees the real Kurama leading the merry band of Konoha killers through Uzushio’s streets. Kurama looks carefree, as usual. Or, as carefree as a demon of hate and malice can be. Izuna knows that those smiles and smirks and the sharp tap of his claws strike fear into the hearts of those unprepared. Kurama’s greatest asset is his ability to create fear. He inspires it, cultivates it, uses and manipulates it with the curl of his lips over fangs and the pulse of his chakra rolling out in waves. The very way he positions himself to appear taller, to tower mentally over them...everything. He’s good at it. Izuna’s convinced he doesn’t know he’s doing it most of the time. Sure, he acts like a total ass, but Kurama did not act scary. He *is* scary.

The Kurama clone turns to Naruto as they get closer and closer to their destination, “hey, kit, let's go find the others hm?”

“Where’s Izuna going?”

“Him and I gotta sort some things out with Konoha, we’ll let you talk to them later if you want?”

Naruto’s eyebrows pinch. Izuna automatically reaches out and pokes his forehead where they wrinkle. “Keep that up and you’ll age far quicker than you’re supposed to.”

“Hey!” Naruto rubs the spot.

The two depart from him after a second more convincing, and a promise that Naruto could, infact, know what all the fuss is about—in time. Izuna slips atop the roofs and watches as the party moves through the broken streets. Kurama and him had picked their meeting spot the day before; the old administrative building, the very place the Uzukage would have held meetings. The building is only slightly taller and wider than the rest, rounded instead of square, with an overview of all the village sprawled out before it, and covered in tattered banners of each clan crest that made up Uzushio’s shinobi. The upper floors once held large, open windows with a large balcony to allow shinobi to travel directly into the offices. Fear of an unknown visitor was unheard of. Every entrance was sealed three or four times over, with fail-safe after fail-safe.

Now, all those seals were stripped away, leaving nothing but holes. Not even the glass remains.

Izuna makes his way up to the balcony now. He scales the building vertically, very aware of the eyes that latch onto his back and stay there until he makes his way inside. He pretends to ignore them and goes at a steady, almost lazy pace.

The Uzukage’s old office is still covered in dust. Bits of broken glass scatter across the floor. Black scorch marks of decades old explosions race across the walls. A tipped over bookshelf with all its contents spilled out slightly impedes the door frame missing a door. In the middle is a narrow, slightly rounded table without its original chairs—Izuna and Kurama had

collected ones from around the other rooms. Old thumbtacks still stand—mismatched in color and stabbed into the rotting wood—where a map had been torn away. And, of course, nature had also done its toll to the room.

They had decided to leave things as they are, to make their guests uneasy with the passage of time. This was Kurama's idea, and Izuna couldn't be bothered to clean the mess up.

He waits in that room for the other to arrive. Instead of sitting at the table, Izuna elects to keep himself leaned against the corner of the room. Before any person makes it to him though, Karasu jumps through the glassless window and curls himself in the middle of the table like a fuzzy centerpiece.

Izuna sighs and makes a move to remove the menace, but the black fox dodges all of his attempts until he all but scoops him up and hurtles him out the window. He laughs on the way down before catching himself and running away on his accursed purple fire.

Izuna turns back around just as Kurama's chakra spikes to alert him, and he turns the corner. Following him are, of course, the Konoha party. First Jiraiya, who stops in the doorway at the sight of him, then quickly shuffles inside when Kurama tilts his head. Kakashi and Itachi walk in side by side, and the whole world seems to pause when the three see each other again.

Izuna nearly follows Karasu out that window. He would have, if his feet didn't feel rooted to the ground in that very second. His hands clench tightly, fingernails digging into his palms. He keeps his features relaxed and passive, as if those two were nothing more than passerbys. They were strangers to him. They had to be.

His facade would not last long. The more he looks at them, the more all these weeks keep rushing back. He remembers too much of *these* people, and the thoughts of his old life, the life on the other side, were starting to be replaced and that *terrifies* him to no end. He could never forget, not with a sharingan, but it didn't mean that when he thinks of Kakashi he no longer sees his sensei, but he sees *this* Kakashi. Younger Kakashi. And when he thinks of his brother, he sees this one, young, painfully smart and yet so loyal that it hurts him, and Izuna thinks of this *kid* and wonders how on earth he could ever have killed so many of his own.

Kurama sits where the Uzukage would have, at the head of the table. Jirayia sits on the opposite side, where a foreign diplomat would have. Kakashi and Itachi take the seats on either side of Jiraiya. Izuna remains standing by the wall. Kurama's only recognition is a quick glance at his direction, eye aligned to his, then flick to the empty seat beside him.

An invitation.

Izuna leans on the wall, quite comfortable to observe them all. There's an awkward, tense silence that follows, as chairs get shifted and Kurama laces his fingers together in front of him like any real Uzukage. It's a strange sight to behold, that red hair and those piercing red eyes, and the red haori with that Uzumaki swirl decorating his back. He *looks* like a kage, and it pulls Izuna's mind in weird directions.

Kurama inhales sharply, to prepare to speak...and Karasu comes flying through the window, straight at Izuna with the fury of a creature who had just been tossed out moments ago.

“Hey!” Izuna snaps as he raises his arms just in time for his needle-like claws to tear through his sleeves. For a second, he forgets himself and hisses at the fox as the fabric rips, “this is new, goddamnit!” Karasu gnashes his teeth at him like he wants to play. “I’m busy, go bother the brats or something!” Teeth sink into the hem of his cloak. “You’re not Mimi, spit that out. If you’re going to stay, then be nice!” Karasu calms after a second, and Izuna turns slowly to face the entourage of eyes once again. He’s not phased by Jiraiya’s stunned expression, Kakashi’s muted exasperated one, or Itachi’s complete blankness behind his anbu mask. No. He’s not phased. Not one bit.

“That fox killed one of my crows,” Itachi mutters, and Izuna lasers in on that.

He rounds on him, perhaps a bit unfairly angry to cover up his own mortification. “Well *maybe* if you hadn’t nearly killed him he’d be a little nicer to you,” he say to his brother icily, and revels in the uncomfortable shuffle of his fingers along the table’s edge, so faint and subtle that if Izuna didn’t know he did that, he never would have seen it.

“My apologies for hurting your fox.” Itachi bows his head slightly, “we were...at war.”

“You mean you were chasing us down for a crime we did not commit,” Izuna points out. Kakashi and Jiraiya both cringe back a bit.

“You took-”

“Asked.” Kurama pipes up, “Do you deny that?”

“We wouldn’t know unless we talk to Naruto directly,” Jiraiya says.

“Wrong. Itachi heard the whole conversation,” Kurama snaps, “and I bet he told you that as well. You’re just being difficult because you know you're wrong and I’m right.”

The three shift about uncomfortably. Izuna can see how this is going to go. They’ll be sitting here, talking in circles over this issue. He shoos Karasu away as the fox tries to bite his hands, and he joins them at the table, but still does not sit. He puts his hand flat on the table and leans forward towards them, watches keenly as they lean back as one unit.

He looks at Kakashi first, practically pleading for him to do something, to tell them anything, to break this before it begins. Kakashi remains silent. The ever-passive hound of Konoha.

“Naruto will go where Naruto wants,” he starts. “And we are not enemies.”

“You stole our only jinchuuriki,” Itachi says, “how are we not enemies?”

“I am your blood, Itachi,” Izuna says, trying to keep the quiver out of his voice as he says it, “I don’t want to fight you.”

An oppressive silence follows. “But you will-” Itachi finally speaks again, so calm that it could only mean he’s hiding his real emotions. Anger, sadness, the impossibly defined grief

when family members turn on each other—Izuna doesn't know. They're supposed to be strangers. "-if we threaten Kurama, or any of your foxes. You just proved it, how you acted when I commented on Karasu."

"The foxes are innocent, hurting them is like hurting children," Izuna whispers slowly.

"Children...can be weapons too."

Izuna's vision flashes red. He sees in slow motion as everyone stands except for Kurama. Chairs skid and fall with hollow thuds, Kakashi has his hands ready to form a sign, Itachi's own sharingan begins to surface, a red bloom from the middle of his iris, the tomoe begin to appear, and just before it can fully materialize, Kurama slams his fist on the table, startling everyone out of their wits.

"Sit down you brats," Kurama growls just under his breath, his voice seems to reverberate in Izuna's head. A menacing roll of his kyuubi chakra wafts around the room. At the same time, Kurama sends a nasty shock of chakra through their joint seal. It's a complete abuse of what the seal is for, and the pain that laces through Izuna's shoulder has him staggering.

Everyone gathers their fallen chairs and sits, including Izuna.

He glares at Kurama and sends chakra right back, earning him a sharp hiss.

"Children," Kurama continues on as if nothing had happened, "you're all *children.* All menial little things. Flecks of dust, grains of sand, A rock on the cliff face, a blade of grass in a meadow. You're all *so human-"*

"Stop it, Kurama," Izuna reaches out and grabs the kyuubi by his wrist, as if that could keep him there. Kurama looks at his hand with his slitted eyes and curled lip, like he's disgusted by Izuna touching him. "Think of your words before you say them, you fucking moron" *You could compromise us. You could spill all our secrets. They'll know, they'll know, they're not idiots like you think they are!*

"No, I'd like to hear what he has to say," Jiraiya eggs him on, but that seems to snap Kurama out of his fury, because he turns away from Izuna and grins at them with all his pointy teeth.

"What I have to say? Perhaps we should allow Naruto to decide where he wants to live?"

"He's seven, what he wants isn't always what's best for him. Perhaps you should at least provide him with all the same things that a village could, and Konoha will consider it." Jiraiya snaps, "The state of these ruins is, to say the least, non-sustainable for you and several kids if I'm hearing this story correctly."

"There are others, yes," Kurama sniffs, "But they are of no concern to Konoha. If the other villages want to contest with me for them, they're welcome to wade through the storm as you have."

"The only reason you agreed to this is because of Izuna," Kakashi says, stunning them all. It's the first time he's spoken since they've gotten here. He doesn't look at Izuna as he says

this. He challenges Kurama, whose nasty sneer upturns like Kakashi's words are the most amusing thing, "isn't that right?"

Izuna does not look at Kurama. He pretends he's disinterested in this sudden turn of the conversation, even when he feels red eyes bore into the side of his head.

Kurama snorts. "He pleaded your case well enough."

Izuna gets one of his wild ideas again. "I think...there's an obvious solution to this predicament," he says, and looks at Kurama from the corner of his eye, "you'll just hate me for it."

"Well go on, we kinda hate each other already so-" Kurama waves at him to continue.

Is this a good idea, or am I about to make things unnecessarily complicated? "Uzushio and Konoha used to have an alliance," he says, because launching into the crazy was never a good idea. Naruto had told him this that one time he declared he wanted to be hokage. That felt like a whole lifetime ago. Maybe it was.

"Uzushio is gone, if you haven't noticed," Kurama snaps at him.

"Does it have to be?"

Everyone stares at him, a bit dumbfounded, as if he's suggested cutting off someone's head instead. Even Karasu perks up from his spot curled in the corner. "You can't be suggesting what I think you are…?" Jiraiya mutters, "are you insane?"

"Yeah," Izuna shrugs, "I'm not gonna do it though, Kurama would have to-"

"No." Kurama shakes his head, *"no,"*

"But that could… if Uzushio was made into a village again, and Konoha agrees to an alliance, then Naruto could travel freely between the two," Kakashi says, "and any other jinchuuriki or potential ninja from here, and if you needed any help then-"

"No." Kurama seethes. "I did not give them their freedom, did not *watch* my friend *die* for my own, to be shackled by a village again. When we fight, we fight for those we love and no one else. We will not be tools to be called upon, or weapons to deter a war that will happen regardless. We will not come when we are called, and we will not beg to be let off our leash. Bijuu are not meant to be kept in your *cute little cages."* Kurama whirls on Izuna first, probably because he was the idiot who suggested it, "and if you want to go running back to your clan and become a Konoha dog, then you may do so, and leave us to our freedom."

Something ugly wells up inside him, and he can't tell if it's just anger or grief at this point, but it's gross and nasty and leaves a vile taste in his mouth. "And leave you to your isolation," Izuna spits right back, "I thought you were different from me. I told you, that time in Suna, to not make the same mistakes as me and you said you weren't...but you are! You're doing what I did. You're driving yourself away because of your hatred."

Enraged by that accusation, Kurama stands. His clawed hand reaches out. Izuna sees it coming a mile away, but does nothing to stop it from wrapping around the collar of his cloak and yanking him to his feet. They glare at each other and the rest of the world falls away. Izuna forgets about Kakashi and Itachi and Jiraiya, he forgets about everything that's not those blood red eyes, those slitted pupils and those fanged teeth and clawed hands. *He's not Naruto, and he'll never be him.*

"I don't try to kill the ones who love me."

The tomoe in Izuna's eye spins, but it's not his sharingan. The air around him shimmers and flickers with lightning. His cloak and hair flutter about, revealing his other eye, and Izuna doesn't say a word, but none are needed. He holds his hand out, his rinnegan pulses, chakra flares, and he sends Kurama flying back. He hits the opposite wall and he goes right through the concrete. Kurama sits up and shakes out dust and debri from his hair with a murderous expression set upon his face.

Izuna lowers his hand.

"Are you done, you pissy baby?" Kurama shouts at him, unfazed.

"I hate you." Izuna pointedly turns his head away, and ends up locking eyes with Kakashi, who he had forgotten about. He grins at him, like this is nothing but a joke. Honestly, at this point, that's all they are. It does not seem to settle well with Kakashi though, and the man's eyebrows crease in likely confusion.

"Fucking brat," Kurama mutters as he stands up and hops back through the Kurama-sized hole in the wall. It's only then that he seems to remember they have company. The old fox freezes as he settles back down and stares at the three silently shocked Konoha nin across the table. Kakashi and Itachi had, at some point, stood up and maneuvered their way behind Jiraiya, who still sat on the opposite end, watching the two like they were a soap opera.

Kurama drags a hand down his face. "Get out of my sight, I'll...think about what everyone has said."

"We'd like to speak to Naruto," Jiraiya says calmly, much more calm than anyone else has spoken since Itachi.

Kurama considers this. He looks at Izuna with much less venom than he had twenty seconds ago. All it takes is a slight tilt of his head for Izuna to get the memo. He blinks in return.

"I'll take you," Izuna says to them. They jump to action and bunch around him like children. He eyes Itachi especially. He knows that Itachi is especially good with his crow clones and genjutsu. He doesn't suspect anything now, but at some point they should do a whole sweep of the island to make sure that the one he's seeing now is the real deal. "Stay within my sights at all times." Izuna motions for Karasu and the fox leaps up and bounds over to his heels. He silently tells the fox to follow them, and is astonished when he actually listens.

"I'll tell the brats to meet you by the waterfall," Kurama waves them away.

They run out the window this time, walking vertically down the building and then set an easy pace across the rooftops. Its familiar to run like this, even when they have to dodge holes and too-sharp edges left by exploded and corroded craters.

The moment Kurama is out of sight, Kakashi falls into step beside him. “Hello,” he says, painfully awkward.

Izuna grimaces. Is this how it’s going to be? He acknowledges him with just a look and a slight ‘hn.’ It’s all he can really manage at the moment.

“Kurama treats you like a child.”

“You heard him,” Izuna grunts, “we’re all children to him.”

Kakashi looks back at his companions. “Even Jiraiya, do you think?”

Izuna snorts. “Yes, even Jiraiya.”

“Then-” Jiraiya’s face replaces Kakashi’s, much to the other’s annoyance. He doesn’t complain out loud, but it’s written all over his one visible eye. Izuna fights back an amused grin. “-how old is he, really? I mean, I assumed he’s around the same age as you lot—you and Kakashi, that is. Itachi is the *actual* child here—but he’s also Uzumaki, I hear they can live much longer than the rest of us plebeians.”

Izuna thinks about the truth of it. It would be so easy to just tell them, these three in particular. Each one has marked up Izuna’s life, directly or indirectly. He doesn’t know much of Jiraiya personally, but he *does* know him. He knows him through endless stories of him, through shining and watery blue eyes that recounted tale after tale of adventures—and misadventures. Jiraiya had shaped Naruto’s life, and thus had shaped his in the end. He knows that if he sat Jiraiya down and told him everything, the chances of Jiraiya not only listening but believing him were high. And the chances of him keeping his secrets were also pretty high. He’d trust his life with Kakashi, Itachi with his true identity (because the moment Itachi figures out who he is, he would never do anything to harm him, would he?) but with Jiraiya, he could trust the secret of the future.

“Who knows?” He shrugs. It’s not actually a lie. Izuna doesn’t know, besides *ancient.*

Jiraiya’s smiling face grows a bit strained, but he doesn’t comment on Izuna’s vagueness. Instead, he changes gears completely. “My, I’ve just been dying to meet you,” he chuckles, “Those two had a lot of things to say about you. Interesting things.”

Izuna looks over Jiraiya’s shoulder at Kakashi, who has now fallen back beside Itachi. The two were sending each other death glares every so often. He wonders what they could be communicating…

“-I almost pulled rank to kick Itachi off the hunt, or have Shisui do it-” Everyone jolts at that. Itachi and Kakashi both raise their heads. Izuna’s eyebrow ticks up. “-because I thought he was getting too emotionally involved. I would’ve done the same much sooner to Kakashi,”

there's a faint and panicked, *"what?"* from Kakashi.

"-but it turns out he's not on my mission!" Jiraiya throws his head back and laughs. "But you sure do have a strange way of pulling people in, don't you?"

"I...no...most people hate me when I meet them."

"Oh, I can see that, I never said Itachi's emotions were good ones. I think he wants to murder you," Jiraiya says that last bit as a joke. It does not sit well in Izuna's stomach. It wouldn't be the first time he thought the same either.

"As for Kakashi…"

"I don't want to talk about this," Izuna cuts him off before this can begin, because Jiraiya has that shifty look about him that reminds him a bit too much of a sly fox grin. If he knows anything of smiles like that, it's that the only person who wins in those situations is the one wearing the smile. He'd rather be the one grinning in the end. "Do you have any other questions regarding me or Kurama?"

"Yes, I do, actually—I'm glad you asked."

Izuna gestures for him to continue, but the toad sage remains quiet for quite some time. They run along those roofs, jumping over gaps in the street until they're reaching the outskirts of the broken city. Golden hour sets upon them, bathing the world in brilliant, yellow light. And Jiraiya's face morphs into a solemn and old thing. He says, "Do you know...what he is?"

Izuna stops on the edge of a roof, one so steep they ran along a thin seam, the tiles sloping away on either side, plummeting down into the pavement. Izuna searches Jiraiya's wizened face, the deep smile lines on his cheeks, the crows feet by his eyes. A lifetime of grinning and laughing etched into his features. Would Naruto have gotten such things, had he lived to Jiriaya's age? What would his own face look like, marred by time and stress? Would he grow lines down his cheeks like Itachi? Or the permanent and deep-set frown like his father? Would he remain youthfully pretty like his mother?

"Do you?" He asks right back. It gives away his own answer. Jiraiya's silence is his own. Izuna looks at Kakashi and Itachi. "Do they?"

Jiraiya shrugs, "I don't know their minds."

Izuna tilts his head at them. "Well?"

"Kyuubi jinchuuriki," Itachi says, "though it should be impossible." Izuna's mouth twitches. He wonders, briefly, if he'll get a single smile line from smirking so much, or if one day the edge of his lip will permanently freeze, a slight upturn and a crooked smile, immortalized on his features. Would he die smirking like a villain?

Izuna hums noncommittally, much to their annoyance and discomfort. He catches Kakashi's eye. "Got anything to add, Kakashi?"

“I...knew the previous jinchuuriki.” Izuna’s surprise is genuine, but for the wrong reasons they would suspect. He knew this already, he’s surprised Kakashi would actually share that information with him. “Locking that much chakra inside a child is what’s *really* impossible.”

Izuna hums again, this time more amused than just a noise. Because Kakashi *is* right, but also so very wrong. The rest of this Naruto’s kyuubi chakra is locked away within the Death Reaper Seal.

“That would imply Kurama was there during the attack, and also a Konoha ninja at the time.” Itachi points out, “and if that’s the case, then perhaps Izuna as well? Then you lied before, when you said you’re not from Konoha?”

“There are plenty of things that we do not know about our own village,” Jiraiya says, much more sagely than he probably intended. Izuna tries not to look too strained in that second, but his brother reads him like a book. Typical, really.

“You know something we don’t.”

Kakashi sighs, “he knows a lot of things we don’t.” Itachi turns to him. “It’s the truth and you know it too.”

“Secret root agents?” Jiraiya guesses. Izuna shakes his head. “The Fourth’s personal bodyguards?”

Kakashi nearly slips off the roof. Probably not a good memory. Izuna shows him no mercy and merely stares him down as he shuffles back into place. We’re none of that. I’m a bounty hunter and Kurama is...Kurama.”

“An idealist,” Kakashi says.

“A revolutionist.” Jiraiya agrees.

“A problem.” Itachi, ever the realist, despite his supposed kindness, stares them all down. “A threat to Konoha,” He looks at Izuna, “if you weren’t as powerful as you are, he’d be a threat to you, too.”

Izuna squints at his brother. He wants to call him *baby brother* the way Itachi used to call him in his head, considering their reversed age gap, but...it’s strange. “If I weren’t as powerful as I am, I wouldn’t challenge him the way I do.” He turns from them and jumps on to the forest floor to continue on. He’d rather have daylight available to keep track of everyone. The nighttime shadows and trees made it all the easier for someone to slip past him.

“You tossed him through that wall with just your hand,” Jiraiya mutters as they walk down an overgrown path. Izuna heads for the house on the hill. “is it your rinnegan?”

Izuna holds back his bangs for a second, revealing the eye once again. Jiraiya grimaces. Kakashi and Itachi hop back a couple of paces like that would do anything if he activated it.

Jiraiya whistles. “The tomoe are *unusual* for a rinnegan.”

Izuna readjusts his hair. “You know too much, old man.”

“You know too much, Uchiha bastard,” he shoots right back.

“That is very true.”

“Makes you dangerous,”

“Makes me an asset.”

“A threat, as the kid genius would put it.”

“He’s jaded. I’m your greatest ally,” Izuna smirks, “or will you let me slip through your fingers?”

“Doubt it, you’re too attached.”

“To who?”

Jiraiya jerks his head over his shoulder. “To those two brats behind me.”

“Hn.” He doesn’t deny it.

Jiraiya makes his offer then, away from Kurama’s fox ears. Not away from all the ears he should have though. Izuna spots two white tipped tails following them through the underbrush. Kakashi sees them too, but he makes no move to stop Jiraiya. Perhaps the sage *does* know what he’s saying, and *who* exactly, will end up hearing his words. “Come back to Konoha once we’ve sorted out this mess. Kurama…if you know what he is, then why follow him? Why risk your life just to stick by his side? Is it for his power? His protection? He said some nasty things to you back there.”

Izuna stares. Jiraiya is not phased, not even after seeing his eye and knowing what it could do. “Is all of that worth it? You look like you’re dying inside when you look at him.”

“It’s not about worth,” Izuna plows ahead, uncomfortable with this turn of conversation. Are his emotions that easily on display? He thought he was doing better at keeping his despair under wraps. But...if anyone were to bring out the desperation in him, he guesses it would have to be Kurama. *That stupid fox.* “And what he said was true.”

Jiraiya and the rest try to clamber at him for more clarification. He clams up after that and leaves them to their own conclusions. All of which were probably a lot worse than the truth, but Izuna can’t bring himself to talk about his past any more than that. He’ll just have to suffer through the consequences of his loose tongue. Instead, he calls attention to the sound of the waterfall and tells them they’re nearly at the meeting point.

He sends out his senses, just enough to figure out where the jinchuuriki kids are. He gets tiny pinpricks of bijuu chakra in return, speeding towards them from the house on the hill, a bit left of the route Izuna had taken them through. Yugito lead them on the ground, and Izuna has a sneaking suspicion that the foxes were hot on their heels as well. Whenever Izuna leaves them to their own devices, they end up swarming Naruto instead.

The waterfall was the source of the main river that wound through Uzushio, and Izuna remembers it in vivid detail. His Naruto liked this spot the best. It's slightly elevated above the forest so they could look down the river and see it wind its way to the village. Naruto used to sit in the grassy clearing surrounding either side of the river and read his scrolls until the sunlight became too scarce for him to see. Izuna stares at the exact spot he was in when he first showed Naruto that old time-space scroll. The one that had prompted Naruto to create that stupid tattoo seal that decorated his shoulderblade.

"Someone's here," Kakashi sniffs decisively, "Wait, they're gone, but It's not Naruto-"

"Hey, Kakashi!" Fuu bursts out from the surrounding bushes and beelines towards them. Predictably, she throws her kunai straight at Kakashi and causes a panic. Izuna snatches her by the collar of her shirt before she can angrily slash at anyone, she barely seems to realize her feet are not on the ground as she continues to rapid-fire questions at him. "Did you really turn on us? Izuna said if you ever found out he'd have to get rid of you, but you're still here! Did you attack Kurama!? He's my family y'know! Yugito says I shouldn't be friends with Konoha scum, but she's paranoid, can we still be friends?" She looks at the other two, "Who the fuck are you? And-" She finally notices Izuna, "Put me down!"

"Calm down first."

"I am calm!"

"Where's the rest?"

"Hiding!" Fuu cackles evilly, "If you can't sense us then it worked!"

Izuna drops her, and she backflips to land in a crouch. "Stay by my side for now." She obeys him and he takes a moment to scan the treeline. No one insight. "Which one of you came up with this brilliant ploy?"

"Well," Fuu pouts a bit, "to keep us busy, that clone Kurama started to show Naruto these *awesome* barrier seals, it was Yugito's idea to use them though!"

Izuna knows the ones. He uses them all the time while setting up his campsites. "And why are you out here, instead of with them?"

Fuu's smile turns into a sly grin. "I'm the distraction, of course!"

The ground beneath Jiraiya erupts into sand.

"What is this?!" Jiraiya just barely manages to escape as the sand pit shoots up around him and crashes inward. Izuna grimaces, old, distant memories of a different, bloodier sand coffin getting dredged up. "Why are they attacking us?"

Izuna tilts his head as the scene before him unfolds, "They're kids. What did you expect?" he says, just as Naruto and Gaara practically materialize on the branch of a nearby tree.

Naruto laughs, bright and loud, drawing all the attention to him. Just behind him is Gaara with his hands clasped together, eyes darting, as he manipulates his sand to follow Jiraiya

around, making the old sannin dance. Izuna's aware that Jiraiya could end this at any second, but he doesn't. Instead he flits about, slowing down so the sand almost gets him every time. And perhaps it's a bit stupid to allow an unknown jutsu come so close to catching him every time. But perhaps Jiraiya indulges in it, because Naruto grabs Gaara's shoulders and eggs him on. Because Naruto is beaming from ear to ear and chanting for Gaara to catch him. Because he looks happy, and it's hard to take that away from a kid like Naruto. Not when these people know everything that he is and everything he's been through already.

Fuu joins in the cacophony from Izuna's side, cheering on as Gaara nearly snatches Jiraiya's arm. Izuna hopes, prays, that Gaara knows what he's doing and doesn't accidently crush a limb. It would be sad. But then again...as long as nothing went missing, Kurama could probably heal it.

Kakashi and Itachi both hop backward onto the river's surface to avoid participating. Kakashi's laughing, even if Izuna can't hear it, he can see his shoulder's shake ever so slightly.

"Should...should we be allowing this to happen?" Itachi whispers to Kakashi as Izuna strides up to them. Fuu comes along as well. She nearly dives head first into the water, but seems to catch her balance. Izuna's sure she's not even listening to them as she concentrates on her feet.

"He won't hurt him, will he?" Kakashi asks.

"If Jiraiya gets caught by one jinchuuriki kid, then I think he deserves whatever he gets." Izuna says. He grins at their alarmed faces. "I'll stop it if this gets out of hand-" He spots Yugito creeping along in the tall cattail reeds. Her eyes are focused intently on the back of Kakashi's head. They're slitted and multicolored, drawing on her bijuu's chakra. Within half a second, Kakashi is also aware of her just as she pounces. He catches her foot before she can land her kick.

"You're gonna have to try harder than that, kid," Kakashi says and he chucks her down the river. Yugito doesn't manage to catch herself completely, and gets dunked as a result. She hisses at him.

"Okay, things *are* starting to get out of hand," Izuna sighs, but he does nothing as Fuu decides *now* is the perfect time to strike Kakashi. Itachi starts forward, but Izuna keeps him back with a single look. "You really think he needs help?" He asks his brother, and they watch as both Yugito and Fuu attack at the same time. Neither of them are quick enough to land any real hits.

"Aren't we supposed to be talking, not sparring?" Itachi says to him, "you're wasting our time."

"We've got time to waste," Izuna says, "Besides, this is the easiest way to get these brats to like you."

Itachi turns back to the mess before them. Kakashi keeps chucking Yugito and Fuu into the river. Both of them are drenched at this point but neither gets the memo that they can't beat

Kakashi with straight taijutsu. Jiraiya was having a bit less fun than moments before as Naruto reveals his kunai set, which, at some point, has been modified with custom glitter bomb tags that explode into sparkling orange clouds on impact. Nothing a legendary sannin can't handle.

"Naruto!" Jiraiya calls up to him, "Naruto, do you know who I am?"

Naruto, not one to miss an opportunity, shouts, "You're an old man!"

"What?!" Jiraiya screeches, he falters for just a second. A kunai lands between his feet, sand wraps around both his ankles to keep him there as it explodes and douses him in glitter. Yugito and Fuu both pause to cheer (Kakashi uses the distraction to body flicker over to Izuna and Itachi, effectively ending their fight) Gaara and Naruto high five.

"Alright, alright," Jiraiya raises his hands in surrender, "You've got me!" He sits heavily in the grass as Gaara's sand retreats. "Come down from there so we can speak, like grownups."

Naruto swings down from the branch with surprising grace for a seven year old. Gaara floats down on a patch of sand. Both run right up to Izuna, grabbing at his cloak like it's their anchor before turning around to face Jiraiya, still sprawled out on the grass, acting peaceful.

"Who are you?" Naruto asks, "I know crow-san, he used to follow me around all the time and chased me when I left, and that guy is the one Kurama healed-"

"Kakashi," Fuu whispers to him.

Naruto nods, "but you're weird looking, like a frog!"

"I'm Jiraiya!" Jiraiya declares, indignant, "the legendary toad sannin!"

Naruto looks up at Izuna, questioning. "It means he's really strong," Izuna supplies.

"Are you stronger?"

"Probably."

Naruto turns back to him and sticks his tongue out. "Why are you here, toad-man?"

Jiraiya gives his best smile. "I'm your godfather, Naruto."

Naruto blinks, unfazed. He turns to Izuna again and tilts his head. He's picking up too many habits from Izuna's foxes, it seems. He looks just like them. Izuna opens his mouth, about to answer, when Yugito interrupts.

"Your parents chose him to take care of you if anything happened to them." Yugito stands next to him and crosses her arms. Leave it to a jaded teenager to be blunt about it.

Naruto's eyes dim. There's a pause in the air. Even the slight ocean breeze stops. The world holds its breath as Naruto Uzumaki holds his tongue, thinking. He rolls this new information in his mind, over and over until it's a polished stone. Izuna can see the gears clicking and

turning in Naruto's head. Happiness, confusion, anger, all flashing like lightning in his eyes. Whatever Naruto settles on could change the course of history. Izuna holds his breath too.

"Then…" Naruto's brows crease in frustration. When he speaks, it's not angry, but trembling with that hollow loneliness that rings in all their ears. "Then why didn't you?"

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was a rollercoaster of a chapter. I was having a hard time figuring out where to end it, because I wanted a lot of the conversations and I thought I'd be cheating you guys if I cut the chapter before the konoha crew got to speak to Naruto lol, because the LAST chapter they were actually supposed to settle everything with both Kurama and Izuna but then I made it complicated haha. So I just shoved it all together in this one, and we can move on soon! (I keep saying that we'll get back to hunting akatsuki and then I keep making things more complicated my b)

I had art planned for this chapter but I'm still working on it, and I just... I wanted to get this out there before I forgot to post! When the next chapter comes out, I'll be sure to add the art to this one

Poison

Chapter Notes

I've been informed that even when not intentionally writing angst, I still end up writing angst.

Anyway, this is intentional.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jiraya's smile freezes on his face, as if he's turned to ice. As the seconds turn to minutes of the two staring at each other, one in frozen shock, the other in carefully concealed pain—Naruto's too young to conceal that kind of hurt—Izuna starts to get impatient.

Before he can speak though, Gaara, of all the kids, is the one to speak. His voice, calm and quiet and ruthless as if he's a ruthless shinobi killer rather than a tiny child of seven, cuts through the silence like a knife. "He asked you a question," he says, taking a stand next to Naruto. The two grip each other's hands and Izuna's reminded of a different time, a different place. These two standing side by side—two vicious creatures, two tiny children, souls of the same kind, hate of the same creation. The first time Naruto had realised that...he's not the only one, is he.

There's a stab of something twisting and horrible tumbling through his chest. It claws and screams up his throat, demanding his attention. Izuna ignores it. He understands that particular emotion, and it's completely irrational. It's a ghost of a feeling from a long time ago, raised only from a particular image—of Naruto and Gaara standing side by side as if they would face the world together—that causes it.

Jiraiya chuckles nervously into his fist, eyes flicking around to each of their faces, focusing on the jinchuuriki before him. He shrugs, almost carelessly, and Izuna notes the way Naruto inhales sharply, seeing the action as a dismissal. "Well well," Jiraiya says. He's uncomfortable, clearly, and doesn't know enough about children to keep it under wraps. He clearly doesn't understand that Naruto can read his emotions better than any adult, any shinobi, ever could. He doesn't know, or he doesn't care. Izuna wishes he could punch him straight into the next dimension, but unfortunately, Jiraiya could be trusted with the fate of the world and only the fate of the world. Anything else, Izuna wouldn't let the old toad near with a ten foot pole. "I'm a busy man, Naruto. The village demands it of me-"

"Don't lie," Izuna cuts in. He takes Naruto, and subsequently Gaara who still clings to him, and tugs them both behind him. "You ran from the responsibility just like the rest of them."

Jiraiya mouths 'the rest of them,' sparing a quick side-eye at Kakashi. Izuna catches it and points an accusatory finger at him, enraged, "Kakashi was a teenager when it happened, and I

don’t care about that stupid fucking rule that says genin are considered adults because they’re *not.* You want children to look after other children?” Izuna scoffs, “Guess it doesn’t matter, as long as it’s not you.”

Jiraiya sits up fully. “You don’t know nearly as much as you let on, *boy.”*

Izuna’s getting sick of this. He’s sick of fighting. He’s sick of arguing circles around people who will never change, who will always remind so static, a constant stream of white noise between his ears. He’s so sick of lashing out at these people, people he wants to trust and befriend and forgive even when he can’t because they make it so damn hard. *I’m not you, Naruto.*

He lashes out anyway, too familiar himself to change the pace at which he speaks, at which his anger bubbles even when he’s so sick of it he could throw up. “This isn’t about me!” Izuna snaps, “This is about Naruto! This is about how you failed him and if you were any smarter you’d be groveling at his feet!”

Naruto tugs at his cloak, garnering his attention. The look of pure dejection written all over his face is enough to stop Izuna dead in his tracks. “They don’t need to do that,” Naruto all but whispers. There’s tears prickling the corners of his eyes. “I don’t want them to do that!”

Izuna all but crumbles before him. He turns his back on Jiraiya and crouches down to Naruto’s level and makes sure that he looks at him, even when those blue eyes practically sear right through to his soul. He wonders how he looks to them, to Jiraiya and Kakashi and Itachi, staring holes into the back of his head. He knows they view him with caution, with enough respect due to his power and his name alone. And what a pathetic sight he makes, that all it takes for him to lower his head is Naruto.

Naruto doesn’t know it, but if he asked Izuna anything, he’d probably do it without question. To have that kind of power at the age of seven, it’s unspeakable.

“What do you want from them, Naruto?” He asks. “And...you don’t *have* to want anything either. There’s nothing wrong with not knowing.”

But Naruto has obviously been thinking about them, perhaps ever since that ramen stand in steam country when he’d slowed down enough to stop and wonder why he was there, and where Kurama would take him, and if he really wanted to leave Konoha at all.

“I don’t want them to hurt you and Kurama,” He says.

“They won’t,” Izuna tries to keep his voice steady. He nearly chokes on the lump forming in his throat. “Don’t think about us, Naruto. You can be selfish, it’s okay.” Izuna and Kurama are selfish. And Naruto? Naruto is what you’d call a hero. He was good. He was the sun. He was— *he is*— everything that Izuna and Kurama are not. But there’s nothing wrong with a little selfishness. There’s nothing wrong with Naruto wanting something for himself for once. Even Izuna’s Naruto had wanted selfish things. He’s reminded, sullenly, that the selfish thing he chose was saving him when everyone else had told him Sasuke was a lost cause.

“I want to know who my father was. He was a shinobi, right?”

Izuna falters. “Did...did Kurama not tell you?”

Naruto shakes his head, and Izuna sees a haze of red descend over his vision. *I’ll kill that stupid fox.* “He only told me about my mother. He said that this was her home, and I want to make it look pretty. Kurama showed me the scrolls in the big room under the ground and said they’re my family’s power. I want to know what she could do. But he doesn’t talk about my father, he just called him an idiot and told me he died protecting everyone, but because he died, he left me!”

“I’m going to kill that bastard fox,” he grumbles to himself. Naruto gasps, looking scandalized, and pounds his tiny fists into Izuna’s chest.

“No! Don’t hurt him!”

“He’s holding information from you,” Izuna says, bitingly. He takes Naruto’s fists into his own hands. Naruto is too young. Too fragile. Too innocent. And too trusting. Izuna should not be as shocked as he is that Kurama twists things to his own liking, that he would even do such a thing to Naruto, that his loathing of Konoha and Minato—justifiable things that Izuna doesn’t hold against him, but *still—* are a blight that infects all his words. That he doesn’t give things as facts, and that Naruto would be much more influenced by that type of raw and unbridled anger.

But Naruto needs all the facts and all the information before he makes any decision. Misinformation is a poison, infectious and cancerous and Kurama isn’t helping in the slightest. Izuna wants to be surprised, he wants to have the benefit of the doubt when it comes to him because it’s so impossible to blame him. But Izuna does not want Naruto to be led astray by it, not as he had for so long. “Your father was the fourth hokage.”

Naruto stops his fruitless struggle. He gapes openly at him, and then at the three ninja behind him. Izuna keeps going. “He died to protect Konoha, and he died to protect you. And before he died, he gave you a great power. I’m sure he hoped you’d one day learn to use it. To wield that power in order to protect your precious people.”

“What was his name?” Naruto whispers, both impossibly fragile and incredibly strong.

“Minato Namikaze,” Kakashi is the one who answers him. “He was my sensei.”

“I was his sensei,” Jiraiya says right after. “I should have been there, for him and for you. Izuna is right, I should grovel at your feet, Naruto. I failed him. And I failed you.”

“I don’t want your guilt,” Naruto spits at the ninja over Izuna’s shoulder. His eyes flash a red that Izuna has been growing all too familiar with, so much so that he doesn’t even flinch, not as the other three do, as Kyuubi chakra starts to bubble up just under Naruto's skin. Izuna keeps his Sharingan activated, waiting, just in case. But instead of kyuubi chakra spilling forth, all that happens are huge, glistening tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. They drain off the red, traveling down as his tears spill over and Naruto cries, silently.

There are four adults present. And none of them are the ones who know what to do when someone cries. They all still where they are. Izuna crouched with Naruto’s hand wrapped

around half of his fingers, Kakashi, Itachi, and Jiraiya all slightly hunched forward, staring, stunned. Even Gaara's green-ish blue eyes widen slightly, though he clasps his hand more firmly with Naruto's. The one who *actually* does something is Fuu. She knocks Izuna away like he's made of paper, shoving herself between him and Naruto.

"Are you just gonna stand there?" She growls at them all, even him, "If you're not gonna help then go away!" her own bijuu chakra, that glittery and bright thing, starts to flicker and burn the retina of Izuna's eyes. He blinks the spots from his vision and stands up, his sharingan flickering off.

And, to make matters worse, he senses Kurama barreling towards them at the speed of sound. Izuna backs up, already tasting the ash in his mouth and the pop of pressure in his ears as Kurama's chakra washes over the clearing. He holds out his arm and gestures for the Konoha trio to follow suit. They do without hesitation, no doubt knowing what is about to happen. In a streak of red and fire in the dying daylight, Kurama appears before them, smoke curling out of his mouth. He left a path of ashen footprints and claw-marks decorating the tree trunks.

When red eyes lock with his, Izuna's prepared to get the brunt of whatever anger Kurama has been building up for the past hour and a half or so. When they left him, he'd been brooding, and now, Naruto is crying.

However, he doesn't say a word. He only glares sharply at them, the four of them standing like idiots, then he turns his attention to Naruto. He scoops him and Gaara up both and whisks them away with a leap that sends him into the tree branches. Yugito's chakra flashes next, a phantom cat-form hisses at them before she and Fuu take off after Kurama.

All that's left is silence.

"I think we fucked up," Jiraiya mutters.

Izuna, too tired to continue to fight, just looks at him over his shoulder. There must have been *something* in that stare though, because they all shuffle back from him. "You think?" Izuna sighs heavily. He's left there, with three idiots tailing him like they're just more foxes in his pack. *Konoha dogs…* He thinks bitingly.

"I'll show you where you can set up for the night," Izuna says, and he stretches out his own limbs. "Unfortunately, we have to go the same way Kurama went." Kurama and him had discussed this before, and had come to the conclusion to house their gracious guests in one of the house's main units. The thing was old and traditional, more of a complex than just one solid building, with an overgrown wild flower garden in the middle, so it worked out. Sure, it would keep them remarkably close to their target—Naruto—but it also allowed Kurama to not have to travel far to keep an eye on them. And it would be Kurama to watch them, because Izuna at that moment did not want to return there for the night.

Kurama and all the kids and him would normally pile up in the same room, futons and blankets sprawled from wall to wall. But he's too emotionally and socially drained for any of that. No, he'll go find a quiet place in the forest to sleep, or maybe crash on the beach… anywhere where he doesn't have to run into another soul for a while. He doesn't want to deal

with questioning eyes, with Fuu's insistence on teaching her, Yugito's deadly glares, Gaara's silent but persistent gaze. And, they're all probably a little mad at him.

Aka and the rest of his foxes start to creep timidly out of the woods as Izuna starts leading them down the riverbank, back towards the ruins. It freaks Jiraya and Itachi while Kakashi just narrows his eye at them. They whisper among themselves, Kakashi pointing out the names he remembers, and tells them that they *probably* won't hurt them. Because it's never 100% with wild creatures. Aka trots right up to his heels and Izuna makes sure to scratch between her ears. Karasu, ever diligent, is still lurking around. Every so often, Izuna will see a flicker of purple fire out the corner of his eye.

Not enough time passes from them walking through the forest to them reaching the hill. Izuna tells them to stay close, and to not open any doors unless he says they can. They follow his strict rules, probably from fear of Kurama rather than *actual* respect. Izuna doesn't blame them. He doesn't deserve it, and Kurama fucking doesn't either. The kids though...they all deserve the world for having to deal with two complete wrecks of supposed adults and the entire world vying for their power constantly.

"I'm going to tell you this now," Izuna says as they skate past the first building, the one with Kurama currently pacing within—and all the jinchuuriki kids huddled around his chakra like little flames next to a bonfire. Izuna can feel his chakra practically bubbling up against the outer walls. "When you're on Uzushio, either Kurama or I will be monitoring you. We won't go into your room, but don't think for a second you can move around without us knowing." He turns to face them as they reach the paper sliding door. A couple of the squares have been knocked loose, but it's the best they have.

"That's just great. Don't trust us yet?" Jiraiya says. Izuna thinks it's supposed to be a joke, and judging from the awkward laugh that follows, it surely was. Instead of answering, Izuna slides the door open. The inside of the room is pretty bare. Tatami mats line the floor, the left wall are more sliding doors that only lead to shelves of rolled futons and decade-old blankets. Izuna lights a dusty oil lamp that hangs from a chain in the middle of the ceiling.

"Nothing a shinobi can't handle," Izuna mocks them with a bit of fake flourish. He's tired, sue him. "If you have no more questions, goodnight." He turns to leave, to wallow in his own self pity for a few hours before passing out into a nightmare-filled sleep, but Kakashi takes a step towards him, hesitates, and changes his mind.

So Izuna stops in the doorway and leans on the frame. Kakashi looks strange, standing in the intense flickering light like he doesn't know what to do with himself. It's familiar though. He mimics Izuna, and Itachi, and he mimics every human being on the planet before him, and will mimic all the ones after. That look of ' *are you really gonna make me say it?'* conveyed so perfectly in Kakashi's one singular eye. It's a crime how much expression Kakashi can manage with ¼ of his face, and how little he does just that.

But there's a bit too much of ' *it'* to be said when it comes to him and Kakashi. And Kakashi probably wants to talk about it all. About Izuna's letters, about his past, about his rinnegan that Kakashi never saw until today, about if he remembers anything from that night in the snow, when Izuna snatched away the memory of his real identity right from Kakashi's brain. Izuna's practically been ignoring him this entire time, besides the occasional grin in his

direction just to save face. It's not on purpose, per say, just that Jiraiya is infinitely more impersonal to speak to. He can talk about larger things with Jiraiya; the fate of the world, the consequence of Jinchuuriki's running themselves...Kurama. He knows that those things won't dig deep and rip, that he can be as vague as he wants without fear of consequence.

And, of course, there are more important things to do than to comfort himself with healing his own wounds, fixing his bonds, trying to be a better person for better people than him. So now they stand there, Kakashi in the middle of a dusty old room, and Izuna leaning haphazardly in the door, like he's ready to escape at a moment's notice.

Kakashi snaps out of his frozen state and fiddles with one of the pouches on his vest.

"Here-" A tiny, silent bell on a dirty red string, so corroded and worn that the metal doesn't shine, dangles between his pointer and thumb. Kakashi offers it to him like it's something valuable. Like its gold or jade or priceless information.

Izuna doesn't make a move to take it back. He glances from the bell to Kakashi's eye. "You can't just give it to me," He points out. "I have to win it back." And there's so much *more* behind it that Izuna nearly takes the words back right as they leave his mouth.

Kakashi's fingers curl into a fist around the tiny thing, clearly understanding, clearly knowing, and there's a flash of anger that surprises him. "And when will *that* happen? After you galavant off to mist to kill a kage? Or when you're done running around at Kurama's beck and call? Or perhaps after the world ends?" And even in that anger there's hopefulness, a wide eyed innocence, the wish for Izuna to comply for once, to let him in, to let them speak, to tell him something, anything. Izuna can see it, with eyes as sharp as his, the ' *are you really gonna make me say it,'* and what is *it* when it comes to them?

Stay. Kakashi says with just one eye, standing there and accusing him as he should. Izuna's heart thumps a bit louder in his ears, a vile bitterness rising in his throat. Will he run forever?

But instead, he clicks his tongue, irritated nonetheless, tired beyond belief, wanting to run away so bad that he tips himself out the doorway before he even answers. Because Izuna is a coward. He's a self loathing bastard, he hates himself beyond belief, he's rotten to his core, and he's selfish, so selfish that he takes this look on Kakashi's face and turns from it, denies him, rejects him, and leaves him.

"I'll see you…later, Kakashi," He mumbles, then spins a portal behind him and falls into it before he can watch Kakashi's face crumble. One moment, he's staring into that grey eye that pierces straight into his soul, trying to pick apart the very walls he's built around him. The next, he's landing flat on his back, disturbing the wild grass and fireflies that swirl up around him like glittering embers. The river gurgles, the waterfall roars.

It's been months since he's been here on the wrong side of time. The ache of loss and pain still coiled deadly around his lungs, always waiting to strike out and poison all his thoughts and feelings. And even if it were nothing but a dull ache most days, it keeps him at an arm's length from anyone he wants to get close to. Because *people* are just a reminder that they're not *his* people.

No one will be Naruto, not even Kurama who he can admit now that he's just been waiting with his breath stuck in throat for the fox to somehow, miraculously mold into him but doesn't, his shape remains the same but even Izuna knows that the resemblance is barely skin deep. Not when Kurama's chakra practically glows on his skin even when he's not using it. Izuna can feel it radiating like molten lava, pouring from every fiber of his being. It's Still bright and obnoxious but it's all the wrong color.

He wishes it were easy to move on. And he thinks, bitterly to himself, that if Naruto had just let him go—had sent him here with a goodbye—that he *could* get over it eventually. But Naruto didn't. Instead, he'd smiled and placed a seal on his heart, a cage with a snake that bites into his hands whenever he tries to unlock it, filling his veins with rotten, poisonous guilt. He should be immune to poison, Orochimaru made sure of it, made sure to instill it into his bones with every jutsu and experiment under the sun and stars.

But there is no jutsu to break a seal like the one Naruto wrote into his soul.

And Izuna wishes that he could strangle the beast that keeps him from loving anyone else.

Chapter End Notes

So, if you haven't noticed already, up until this point there has been practically no plan with this fic. We're just coasting and seeing where each chapter takes us. NO MORE. I have an ending in mind.

Here's the dilemma. This story, hey, it's kind of long already, and there's still a shit ton that I want to get through. So I've been thinking...that I want to write this into two or three parts, all as long as this or slightly less, just to absolutely flesh out all the plot and pieces and characters and, dare-i-say...~romance~ *wink* *wink* *nudge* *nudge*

Now; should I make these two or three parts each into separate fics and put them in a series? Or should I just keep them all on this fic? Because I don't want to drive people away with an insane word count, but I also realize that lots of people won't read the other parts of a series just for reasons,

Anyway, those are my plans, and I'm not promising anything either because sometimes lifes a bitch, but I hope to wrap part 1 up before summer lol!

The Fall

Chapter Notes

Welp, I said I'd do something less angsty so just, TAKE IT TAKE IT

To that one bastard who a wanted a kabedon (you know who you are) you THIS IS THE BEST YOU'RE GONNA GET WHORE /j

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuna walks too slow for a ninja. Kakashi figures this out after two minutes of tailing him through Uzushio's ruins. He also finds out that simply *walking* through Uzushio is a nightmare and a half. The roads are littered with near invisible seals. Lines and cracks he thinks are just regular wear and tear turn out to be seal lines and he gets zapped and repelled and his chakra starts draining much quicker than he anticipated. Izuna walks through places he can't step foot through, and to top it off his foxes, like their very own portable barrier around him, always laugh and jeer when they catch Kakashi unawares, with his leg stuck or his arm clung out in the wrong direction, or when a barrier flings him out into the open path instead of the dark alleys and in-between rubble reduced houses. Izuna does not look back at him once, but Kakashi knows that Izuna senses him. He's just choosing to ignore him, and that stings like cold rain on the back of his neck.

But of course Kakashi would not leave him alone, not even after he looked at him, and figured Kakashi out before Kakashi could even figure *himself* out then promptly ran away. Izuna's *very* good at running, and even his leisurely pace through Uzushio is almost not slow enough for Kakashi to keep track of him. He's out of reach, always. The moment Kakashi gets more than ten feet from him, he's gone again, bouncing over a roof or stepping into a barrier Kakashi can't follow. Kakashi can feel frustration starting to claw at him, starting to make his moves even more clumsy as the minutes fold over each other, and suddenly he's been watching Izuna wander around Uzushio for twenty, then thirty, then fourty, fifty, an hour, an hour and a half—where is he even going?

Because there doesn't seem to be a goal in mind. Izuna simply strolls between broken buildings, runs his hands over beautiful and vine-covered mosaic murals of ocean waves, kicks the dust on the ground and occasionally stoops down just to pluck dandelions from the cracks in the concrete. He tosses them right after, watches as his devilish foxes snap at them with greedy flashing fangs. And then Izuna would smile at them, with all the secrets of the universe behind his swirling black vortex of an eye, and continue on.

Kakashi is absolutely enthralled by it all.

At some point, Aka disappears from his sight, and to Izuna's as well if the slight frown and wandering eye is anything to go by. But she's only gone for a minute or two, and when she

returns a half-dead serpent writhes in her mouth. Izuna pulls one of his more expressive faces when she chomps down and blood spurts down her chin and coats her white belly in red. But then he crouches down and with delicate fingers pries the snake's rigor-mortis body from where it had curled around her snout.

"You're disgusting, you know that?" Izuna says faintly. Kakashi extends out his senses, catches his whispered nothings that only *he* would say to a wild fox; "You're just torturing me, aren't you? Do you know what I was before?" He pulls on Aka's ears and laughs when the fox complains. The two silver twins show up and Aka splits her catch into three. They stop for a second, and Kakashi sees his chance then.

There are no barriers in sight, so he goes for it. He slips out from between the ruined store front and the tree he's crouched behind, intent on catching Izuna once and for all.

It all backfires within seconds as Izuna's other two foxes, Mimi and Tama if he remembers correctly, spot him instantaneously and rush up to meet him. Kakashi panics and flees back into the safety of the tree, then curses himself for being such a coward. *They're just foxes! And it's not like they'll hurt me either.* He berates himself. Once he's sure his heart won't leap from his throat, he chances a look up to where Izuna still sits with his foxes.

Izuna stares right back at him, completely unreadable. Kakashi retreats farther into the branches, like a thin veil of leaves and sticks could hide him from Izuna's intense eye. It lasts only a breath, and then shatters into a million tiny pieces. He turns away again and continues on as if Kakashi were nothing but a passing bird sitting on a wire.

It rubs him the wrong way. Kakashi thought he was not one to chase, but here he is, in the far removed corner of the world, stalking Izuna like he's prey. And to make matters worse, Izuna *ignores* him. He's been ignoring him the entire time Kakashi has been here save for the occasional grin or words that mean nothing to either of them. And perhaps Kakashi is a bit too guilty to be selfish. He's still duty bound to Konoha, and it's easier if he just lies to himself and frames it all for those unselfish purposes. He's just getting information for Konoha. He's just trying to figure Izuna out to make sure he's safe enough to allow through the village gates. He's trying to know just how strong he is.

It's not because Kakashi wants to know about Izuna's tangled past to compare it to his own, to figure out just *how* similar they are—because he knows that particular kind of grief that graces Izuna's features more often than not, he knows survivor's guilt and the weight of expectation and the horrors of genius. It's not because he's curious either, at the possibility of which of Izuna's ghosts he resembles.

It's also not because he wants Izuna to look at him and keep looking at him until Kakashi can read his soul through his blank eye that reminds him of the endless, starless night skies. His eye looks like the end of the world and it's terrifying how deep and blank it is, and also thrilling. Kakashi kind of hates himself for even thinking that in the first place.

He doesn't know Izuna, but Izuna sure knows him in some capacity, and that itches like burns under his skin.

Izuna moves on from his spot and feigns into another barrier Kakashi can't follow, forcing him to maneuver through another path. He clicks his tongue impatiently as Izuna slips out from under his grasp once again, disappearing from his view as if he used a portal. But that's not the case. There's no influx of Izuna's chakra or pop and whirr in his ears as time and space simply rip itself apart to allow Izuna through.

There has to be something poetic about the universe bending at Izuna's beck and call.

(And something else poetic about the one person who can control Izuna in the same regard. That is, *if* Kurama can control him in the first place. Kakashi still thinks so, despite the contradictory evidence, ie; Izuna throwing him through a fucking *wall* .)

It takes Kakashi an embarrassingly long ten minutes to find him at the other end of the barrier, tucked into a narrow back alley that descends down a paved hill. Steep steps are carved into the stone road, either side filled with mostly intact stores, narrow and tall and towering over Kakashi's head. The road is so narrow that if he were to walk down a wall sideways, he's sure his hair would scrape one end while his feet stuck firmly to the other.

Izuna is already inside one of the many abandoned stores when Kakashi lands heavily onto a stone step. It's slick with soft moss and cushions the sound of his feet perfectly, but Izuna still looks up at him, face blank. Again, there are no barriers here, only a large window spiderwebbed with cracked glass and a door half off its hinges separating them. But Kakashi still cautiously approaches him as if he would disappear again. At this point, he wouldn't be surprised. But this time, if Izuna were to open up a portal and try to run from him, Kakashi would follow him through it, no matter what was on the other side. He'd follow, selfishly and stupidly.

As Kakashi toes through the broken door, careful to not make it swing as if it would break the stillness in the air, Izuna finally speaks to him. "I thought Kurama was acting as your probation officer." It's a simple statement, asking Kakashi, *'why are you here?'*

"Kurama has Naruto and the rest of the jinchuuriki with him. It's not like I can make off with one if they're right under his nose," Kakashi says. The truth of it though? Kurama had pulled him aside and told him exactly where Izuna was at the moment, then shoved him out the door room with a wicked, fanged grin. He had been so baffled that it had taken him a good five minutes to compose himself before he began to move again.

"Hn." Izuna turns away from him and studies the pieces of fabric draped over a metal bar. Kakashi realises, a bit late, that they're inside an old, dusty clothing store. A shinobi one, by the look of the folded shinobi pants on a low table, displays of fine-mesh chainmail shirts, and a whole tower of blank sealing scrolls in the corner. What's distinct though, are the rows and rows of bright and colorful haori hanging from ceiling to floor. Half of them bear the Uzumaki swirl, some of them embroidered into the shoulder of the sleeves, some of them painting the silk, huge, black, and ink splashed across the back or thin lined and filled with red. Most of them had the same pattern of waves, rippling across the fabrics as if they were alive just like the ocean. In the back there's an L shaped desk with a wall covered in square shelves, each housing rolls of uncut fabrics.

Izuna looks at displays, runs his hands along the rows of vibrant haori and cloaks, and then he beelines behind the counter and kneels out of sight. Kakashi leaps up onto the counter and sits to see what this is all about.

There's a chest there, a long and low thing made of red cherry wood and a brass buckle. A faint Uzumaki spiral is etched in black. Izuna clicks it open, the hinge creaks with rust, and throws the lid up without a care that it smacks the back wall and a cascade of dust descends around him.

He shuffles through the fabric there, all of it in darker colors; dark navy blues, garnet reds, burnt oranges and dull browns—nothing like the tropical sunset colors of the rest of the store—until he finds what he's looking for. Iridescent waves on matte black, the same exact cloak Izuna has been wearing ever since Kakashi met him, only brand new and locked away in a chest behind the counter in this little back alley store.

Izuna pulls it free and lets the chest fall closed with a sharp thud. He barely regards Kakashi at all, shrugs his old, tattered cloak off his shoulders and swings the new one on, adjusting it briefly. He holds the old cloak in his hands, grips it tightly between his fingers, and hesitates. He folds it carefully and sets it down next to Kakashi, and then and only then does he look at him. "Do you need something?"

"I need you to stop being an asshole."

Izuna snorts, amused, and Kakashi pretends to ignore how it makes his ears ring. "Unforchunately, that's not going to happen any time soon."

Kakashi scowls, Izuna's mouth starts doing that thing Kakashi has tricked himself into hating, the beginning of his knowing look that always has him floundering, grasping at to what it means. Before Izuna can simply smirk at him and Kakashi loses all semblance of why he's here, he plows ahead.

"Fight me," Kakashi says in a breath, it sounds so stupid and childish he almost chokes on his words before he can say more, "for the bell. You said it yourself, you have to win it back."

Izuna's eyebrow twitches, and at least Kakashi has intrigued him, because he doesn't immediately vanish from his sight. Rather, he turns *towards* him with a curious tilt to his head. Kakashi suddenly notices that the space behind the counter is incredibly narrow. His legs, dangling off the side of the counter, nearly knock into Izuna's cloak. And that space only shrinks even more as Izuna looks at him, cages him with just his eye and Kakashi immediately wants to retreat.

But his mouth runs before he can catch it. "I won't wait until the end of the world for you to make due on your promises."

It's apparently the right thing he's needed to say this entire time, because Izuna's coldness burns right off him. A spike of chakra laced with lightning shoots up Izuna's entire form, fizzling in Kakashi's ears like chirping birds, *like chidori.* Kakashi makes himself stay perfectly still, to not react to a pure show of power, because if there's one thing he knows

about Izuna now, is that he's deliberate when it comes to Konoha shinobi, and that extends to Kakashi as well. Deliberate in that there is no reason for Izuna to hurt him, so he won't.

"Let's make it more interesting," Izuna says.

Let's not *make it more interesting.* Kakashi's heart protests violently. He crosses his arms just to keep something between them, because Izuna, that bastard, just leans forward into his space. It's such a subtle shift, but suddenly Kakashi is the one that's completely trapped. Even while Izuna literally has a shelf to his back and Kakashi boxing him in, keeping him there. Kakashi could easily fling himself out of this situation within an instant, and by god he's tempted, but even more tempting is the glint of mischief dancing like a spark in Izuna's black eye.

And finally that horrific and captivating smile blooms onto all his features. All fox and no Uchiha. Kakashi thinks he learned it from Kurama, or perhaps it was the mysterious someone that Kurama looks like, the faceless, nameless figure that haunts Izuna's every thought. "If you win, I'll do just that," he grows more sullen, serious, Izuna means his words more than he's meant any before, "I'll go back to Konoha with you. We don't have to go to mist and 'kill a kage', —Kurama probably wants to handle that himself anyway-" That is alarming in its own right, but Kakashi lets it slide for now, "-I think I also promised I'd teach you more about the sharingan, so I guess I'll do that too."

"And…and if I lose?" *Which will most likely be the outcome regardless,* Kakashi reminds himself bitterly.

"Then I get my bell back." Izuna shrugs one shoulder, the movement makes his cloak ripple, the brand new waves catch the broken streams of sunlight coming faintly through the shattered window, they shift in color like oil on water. The patterns are brighter than the old one, not bogged down by mud or dust or fox fur or whatever those traces of golden yellow were that refract the light in too-odd ways to be part of the original design.

"-And I continue to torture you." His eye catches just a bit of the golden sunlight as well, and Kakashi refuses to let his breath stutter. It turns his ink black iris into a deep, garnet red.

Kakashi gives him a flat look rather than lingering on why the stakes are so stacked against Izuna, but he won't complain because he'll probably lose regardless. "This has to be a fair fight."

"Ah. You want me handicapped, how cruel," Izuna says in an equally dead tone. Before Kakashi can lash back, he continues, "You really shouldn't sell yourself short, Kakashi. But this will be a spar of sorts, so rules should be established…"

"No sharingan."

Izuna grimaces, "Then I'd just win-" Kakashi scowls at him again, "What? Don't act like you can beat me without your sharingan as you currently are. We can use our sharingan. I won't use rinnegan, and we only use taijutsu and weapons. No genjutsu or ninjutsu."

"And seals and summons?"

“No.”

Kakashi looks at the tattooed seal on Izuna’s forearm, then back at him. It’s Izuna’s turn to scowl, “Like I’d use my katana against you anyway.”

“Why’s that?” Kakashi spits back, already annoyed about how brash Izuna is. The worst part is that he has every right to be. And Kakashi knows that he’s the one who asked for this, but it still digs into whatever little pride he has left at how completely outclassed he is.

“It’s not a weapon you point at friends,” Izuna says dismissively, like it means almost nothing. But to Kakashi those words wrench into his very soul and stick there like glue. And it’s strange to hear Izuna say such a thing. To acknowledge whatever it is that they have. And to put it all into a word as simple as *friends.*

“What’s…what’s my win condition?” Kakashi asks instead of addressing whatever the fuck it means.

Izuna does answer him for a couple of seconds as he thinks of something. “All you have to do is pin me once before I get the bell.”

“That seems…” He almost says too easy, then reconsiders. Because normally, getting pinned doesn’t mean a loss in the slightest, that is unless kakashi can hold him down for more than a couple of seconds, which he doubts fully. In reality, it makes things more difficult because that means they’ll be close enough that Izuna could easily snatch a bell before Kakashi has the chance to trap him. “Fine,” Kakashi nods once. “We’re doing this now before you can run away.”

Izuna has the nerve to laugh at him. “I’ve never run away from anything in my life,” It’s said with such freedom, a total lie dripping with sarcasm and self loathing. Kakashi can’t help but to roll his eyes, covered or not.

“I have a feeling you’ve run from everything that’s not a fight.”

Izuna opens his mouth, looking mildly offended, then shuts it again with a click of his teeth. Instead of saying anything, he backs out of Kakashi’s space entirely, leaps over the counter, grabs his old cloak, and motions for Kakashi to follow. Kakashi spins and jumps down just as Izuna whisks out the door. *Is he…is he running again!?* By the time he’s also exited the building, Izuna is nothing but a black smear on the rooftops. His foxes, minus the flying one, all crowd around the building and whine at their master to come down. He does not.

Izuna checks behind him once, to make sure Kakashi is following, then disappears over the slanted tiles. Kakashi gives chase in earnest this time. And Izuna, ever the gracious bastard, does not go where he knows Kakashi can’t follow. He ends up only a few steps behind more often than not until they’re leaving all of the areas Kakashi has been to so far. They exit the city ruins and head to an entirely different section of forest, away from the river and the path to the waterfall. The trees here have more vines than leaves and thick clusters of bright, tropical flowers. It takes only a few minutes for them to reach the destination.

An old training field of sorts. Or, that's what it appears to be in Kakashi's eyes. Izuna stops them in the middle of a large flat clearing, clearly shinobi made. The trees that line the perimeter don't look battle-worn, but there's no overgrowth of the grass or invasions of wildflowers and creeping vines like everywhere else.

"I used to come here when I got bored," Izuna says suddenly. His eye remains downcast as he draws his sword and slashes it mindlessly into a nearby tree.

"That's unnecessary," Kakashi mutters as chips of bark spray out into the open field. This place looks too peaceful to be a training ground. Too perfect.

"It doesn't matter," Izuna directs Kakashi's attention to the trunk of the tree as the white slash Izuna left slowly disappears. Bark and moss grow back over it as if it had never happened. Kakashi gawks at it, then tests his own kunai. He stares as the marks he leaves turn into nothing. The only remnants of it are his own memory. "My current theory is that time doesn't work here. Which is…" Izuna smiles to himself, "ironic."

It's clear that he's started saying things that Kakashi won't understand, but he tucks every word Izuna says for later. Why is it ironic? Kakashi doesn't fucking know. One day, he hopes it'll all click in his head.

"We can spar here without damaging anything. Uzushio surely doesn't need any more of that," Izuna chuckles at his own dark joke. Kakashi does not, still too mesmerized with the strange tree and the strange field, and Izuna standing in the center of it. Truly, there has to be some poet who could wax on and on about the *irony* of it, as Izuna had put, of him standing in a timeless place, a man who could bend space around himself and fall through it.

Could…could Izuna fall through time in the same way? Could he rip open the universe and fall into the future? Or the past? Does he have that power?

"Stop thinking about nonsense," Izuna throws his tanto and it thunks into the trunk just shy of Kakashi's left ear. He gives himself a mental pat on the back for not even flinching; at both the tanto and Izuna's words. "Where's the bell, let's get started."

Kakashi untangles Izuna's gift from his own two. It's too easy to pick out, yet so completely similar. The same kind, really, just so dirty that the metal appears soot-black and the string nothing but brown instead of fate-thread red. He ties it to the hem of his flak jacket, right where he remembers Minato doing the same, and before he can even think of fighting he has to stop. Because it feels too *strange.* He almost chucks the bell at Izuna and tells him *No, we're not actually doing this. Because I can't. I can't be Minato.* But instead his hands just hover over the tiny metal thing. It's mocking him, he swears, even if it's silent as the grave.

Kakashi expects to get jumped then, because he's started the spar but hasn't made a move. But when he tilts his head up to look at Izuna, he's met with another strange sight. Izuna looks at him. And what was it that Kurama had said to them on their way here?

He looks at me and sees someone else.

Kakashi decides that he hates that look on Izuna's face.

He wonders how many times he's seen his own reflection, only to have a monster looking back, or father, or Obito in his left eye. How many people see him for his failure, and how many people see Kakashi for Kakashi? Because he's a mirror, not a person. The copy ninja, a reflection of his enemies only just a bit worse. He's supposed to know his foes better than they know themselves and yet there's Izuna. And even a stranger like him, someone who's not supposed to know Kakashi but he does, doesn't see him for himself. Just another ghost. And is that all Kakashi will ever be to Izuna?

He's struck by how much he doesn't want that. He doesn't want the end of their friendship to be Izuna chasing after a ghost that Kakashi can't be.

He takes the tanto from the tree and takes his chance too; leaps forward into the storm of Izuna's eye, pulls his headband up and lets Obito's sharingan spin. Izuna's drawn back to the present moment just in time to brace a kunai against Kakashi's tanto, or his, but when it's in Kakashi's hand it doesn't matter whose weapon it is, it's simply another tool.

"I didn't say go-" Izuna growls at him, looks at him, regards him as a person and Kakashi could revel in being seen later. Now, he needs to fight as if his life depends on it. He needs to win, to keep being seen, to have Izuna come back with him to Konoha, to bring him to his clan, to call him a comrade, to call him a friend. Kakashi needs to win in order for that to happen.

"-Go." Kakashi hisses right back, kicking out a leg to try and trip him. Izuna hops away, just enough to avoid it and he immediately flicks his kunai in a way that causes the tanto to spin out of Kakashi's hand and land in the dirt behind him. Kakashi flips back to avoid a devastating punch that would have broken his ribs, then four more quick jabs at his neck, kidneys, and a sweep to the backs of his knees. What he doesn't dodge is a solid roundhouse to the side of his head that sends him flying into the ground.

He catches himself on his hands and springs upward, drawing a kunai just in time to block a fist. Izuna draws back just enough that his knuckles won't be sliced, and the slight hesitancy gives Kakashi an opening to attack. With his free hand he tries to jab at Izuna's ribs, just like he'd done before. Izuna traps his forearm in the crook of his elbow instead, and twists upward in a painful angle that nearly dislocates his shoulder. Kakashi kicks him in the gut so he can scramble out of his grip and back away.

They slowly circle each other, sharingan's whirling and spinning in lazy loops as their bodies mimic the spin of their tomoe,

"C'mon, Kakashi, you're better than that!" Izuna goads him, making himself wide open for an attack that Kakashi doesn't dare take. It's too obvious it's a trap.

"I don't think I am," Kakashi chuckles nervously just as Izuna rushes him instead. They exchange a quick number of blows. Kakashi manages to slice a thin line across his cheek and cut a few of his hairs, while Izuna lands six open palmed hits and nearly gets the bell when Kakashi staggers.

"You can't win with a kunai in your hand," Izuna notes as Kakashi tightens his grip on his weapon.

That's right. "Should've made the win condition drawing blood," Kakashi grumbles, and reluctantly throws the kunai to make Izuna dodge. While he's moving Kakashi decides to go for it. He rushes in, Izuna twists midair as Kakashi grapples for his hands. A foot lands into his chest and he's shoved to the ground. He twists out of Izuna's death grip before he can get a hold of the bell, though Izuna does manage to kick it hard enough that the knot loosens as they break apart again. Kakashi backs far away after that, putting almost half the field between them.

Izuna studies him. He studies Izuna, who looks far less relaxed than Kakashi first thought he would. He doesn't doubt that Izuna could easily beat the shit out of him. Unless he's far too reliant on his overpowered ninjutsu and dojutsu, another possibility.

"You can't win from over there either!" Izuna shouts.

"Neither can you!"

"You've got more riding on this than I do!"

"Do you?" Kakashi takes the bell off his jacket and spins it around his fingers. It's a dumb move, probably, provoking Izuna like this, especially when that's exactly what Kurama did to get tossed through a wall. But it's hard not to bite back when Izuna starts talking. *He was right. He called himself aggravating and arrogant and he's so fucking right.* "Maybe I should just keep this thing then-"

Izuna attacks him. He pins Kakashi down within a second, rage burning like blood in his sharingan, but in doing so his hands become pretty occupied by keeping Kakashi's arms from shoving him off so they just end up glaring at each other. "This isn't your win condition," Kakashi spits at him. He tries to roll them, because if he can just reverse this then he wins, but Izuna's grip on his wrists is crushing like a snake. He can barely feel the tips of his fingers at this point.

"I want that bell back."

"I can tell," Kakashi huffs, almost a laugh, but much too pity filled. "You also gave it to me though. This was your idea!"

"A mistake. I make a lot of those." Those words fall out of Izuna's mouth, and Kakashi knows just from the sheer surprise on his too-close face that he instantly regrets it. But the damage is done. Kakashi's vision nearly blurs along the edges. He's hurt, he knows he is, but also he can barely register why exactly, or what it is that bleeds his heart dry in that second. Later, Kakashi will forgive Izuna for what he says. It's the heat of a battle, and there's so little space between them, so little in fact that Kakashi himself can barely breathe.

There's a myriad of different emotions flashing through Izuna's eye. A turbulent storm of thoughts and Kakashi can't hear or see them but he thinks he knows a few. It's only a couple of seconds, but in this timeless field they're more like miniature infinities. But eventually, Izuna's iron grip on his wrists slackens.

He takes it, whatever he can get he'll take it at this point. Kakashi can't win against Izuna, that was clear from the start. Kakashi realizes it now. That's it's not about him winning.

In one swift motion he flips them. Kakashi does the same thing; grabs hold of Izuna's hands before they can snatch away the bell and he slams them either side of his head. Izuna only looks at him and all his emotions disappear. They fall away into a veil of porcelain and crimson. But Kakashi's starting to get it. It's never about the words he speaks.

"You lost," Kakashi says, cursing how winded he sounds even though this spar barely lasted five minutes. He'll forever blame it on physical exertion and nothing more. *Because there* is *nothing more.* But more importantly; "You let me win."

Izuna blinks, long and slow, and his sharingan swirls back into the depths of his eye. "Did I?" Izuna asks, almost coyly though his face doesn't let up one second. If anything it falls even flatter, turns into a yokai mask like the ones he wears in Anbu. It could be terrifying, if the truth weren't staring so blatantly at Kakashi. He wouldn't need a sharingan to see it. It's not about Izuna's words. Because whenever he speaks it's either in insults or cryptic messages that don't make sense.

What matters is that this was never about Kakashi winning.

This was about Izuna losing.

"Did you plan to lose from the start?" Kakashi just has to know. He shouldn't ask, because asking just makes Izuna clam up and run away. It's the first thing he learned about him. But he asks anyway.

Typically, Izuna doesn't answer. His shoulders move in a half shrug. And then the porcelain of his mask breaks with the arch of one eyebrow. Izuna twists his wrists in Kakashi's grip, and it's only then that all of his senses return to him, previously too caught up in the fact that he won to realize he's still hovering over Izuna. He can feel Izuna's pulse under his fingers. His hair spills around his head like tendrils of shadows, they fall from his face, just the hint of his rinnegan peeking through the veil. There's a tiny braid behind his left ear and a tiny voice inside his head tells him to reach out and pull on it but he's pretty sure that Izuna would actually kill him, friends or not.

They're close, too close. Despite Kakashi literally being on top of him, Izuna still manages to look down on him. The mask cracks further, tugging at the corner of Izuna's mouth, up into a fox grin just as he says, "You gonna let me up or what?"

Or what? Or what? What if he didn't? What if they just remain there, in a timeless field, and Kakashi would never have to worry about Izuna seeing ghosts in him if this moment played out a thousand times for a thousand years?

Kakashi yanks himself away, removes his hands like Izuna burns him, he might as well at this point. In his chest his heart does a funny little thing that immediately makes him want to throw up. *No. No. No. This is not happening.* Izuna sits up and rubs his wrists but that's all Kakashi can bear to see. The grass and trees are much more interesting. The sky is a nice blue

color, and reminds him of Naruto's eyes. It's a safer color than crimson red or midnight black or lavender purple. Anything's safer than that, right?

Kakashi decides to speak before his thoughts go running off to places he can't catch them. "You don't mean what you say," It's not a question and instantly puts a damper on Izuna's snark. Any more of it and Kakashi would probably just combust.

He can still feel it the second Izuna turns his piercing gaze to him. He doesn't speak, just stares for too long until Kakashi's literally sweating under his mask.

"I don't lie," Izuna says, bites off the end, looks away from him, just as Kakashi turns back, and starts again, "I mean…What I said about it being a mistake that I gave you that bell…I just meant that I probably shouldn't have. When I did that, I was…scared. That you'd think I was your enemy."

"You regret it then." Izuna eyes the tiny bell. This time, when Kakashi offers it to him, he takes it back, rolls it between his fingers, and just looks at it with a heavy frown and a tired eye. "Maa, You probably shouldn't be giving away your precious mementos to strangers then."

He's not expecting Izuna to laugh at his lame joke. But he does. High and cackling and maniacal, feral like his foxes. Kakashi is terrified he's about to utterly break down sobbing like last time, but he doesn't, save for a couple stray tears that gather at the corners of his eyes. He falls back into the grass, his hair flips away from his face and Kakashi can see him clearly. It's a rare sight and he can only drink up the image of him greedily. Can only watch as his chest heaves up and down, watches as he settles, closes his mismatched eyes, a tiny smile, one that's much more pure and graceful than his fox one, appears. For a second, he looks too much like Itachi. Too much Uchiha and not enough fox to be Izuna, and he's someone else entirely. Some Uchiha that Kakashi has never met, but someone he feels he should know nonetheless.

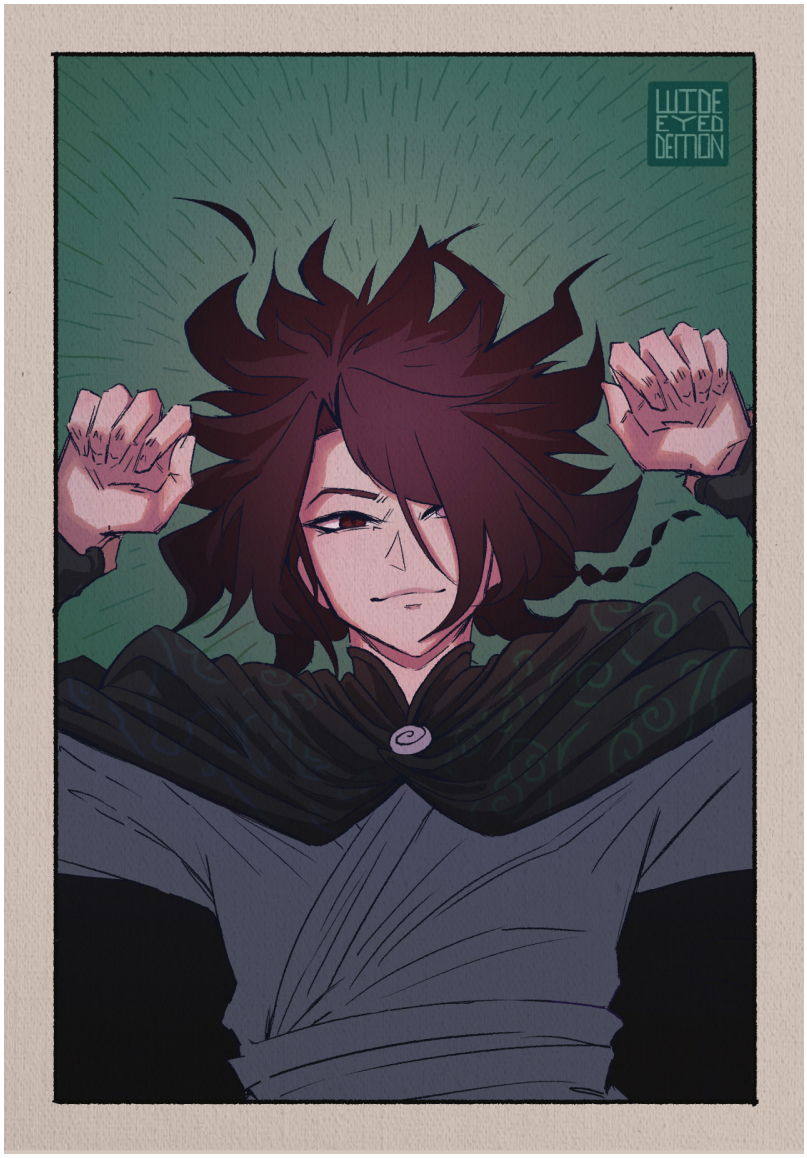
"Guess I'm going."

Izuna's words pierce through the fog in Kakashi's brain, but it still takes him too long to figure out what he means. "What?"

Izuna cracks open his rinnegan eye, stares at him with enough deadpan that Kakashi berates himself for thinking that Izuna could be someone else. He was just inner-monologuing about how Izuna only sees Kakashi as a ghost, and he's doing the same thing? He's pathetic.

"To Konoha."

~Some Art~



Chapter End Notes

Did I write this for the sole reason of making some self indulgent fanart? Yes.
Do I regret it? FUCK NO.

ALSO, this is hilarious, but I'm probably not going to post anything over my break because I have to work v hard on creating a new portfolio bc I haven't made anything of ✨quality✨since high school lol. I'm planning on transferring universities bc I've been feeling hella stuck, So you get this and then Im gone for a couple of weeks, (i'll still be lurking and will reply to comments but probably wont have the energy to write anything extensive)

hope you enjoyed this chapter and thank you as always for reading and any comments and kudos, y'all make my day ❤️

And Arbitrary Blackness Gallops In

Chapter Notes

> This is angsty ahahahahhahaha.
>
> Half of me loves this chapter, the other half is like...is this...too much? Am I doing too much here?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuna finds Kurama alone. It would be worrying if he didn't see another Kurama two minutes ago throwing Naruto and Gaara and Fuu across the training field, and another one scribbling in a scroll with Jiraiya and Itachi leaning over him when he dumped Kakashi back into their designated guest room. All three of them had looked up, Kurama with a shit eating fox grin, Jiraiya's had also split into something much too suggestive for Izuna's taste, and Itachi had stared blankly. He'd get around to talking to *that* particular open wound at some point. Those Kurama's had been clones, while the one carefully detailing time-space seals is the real thing.

He steps over the tangled mess of graying blankets and old futons to the patch of space Kurama had cleared to work. He sits cross legged and hunched over and Izuna can barely stand to look at him like that. There's a black ink smudged up the insides of his forearms and Izuna had to pause to take him in. Naruto used to do that, used to drag ink smudges on his fingers over the insides of his wrists as if he's marking himself over and over, all the clumsy mistakes he makes, so carefully counted. That was never the intention, just a convenient spot to clean his hands, but to Izuna it feels like a gut punch.

He gets closer, because Kurama is oddly quiet. He doesn't acknowledge him when he lets his feet fall a little harder onto the exposed patch of hardwood floor, nor when he sits in an ungraceful heap of crossed legs and hunched shoulders. Kurama doesn't even pause in his brushstrokes as the floorboards creak and vibrate under him. And though there's grace in the way he holds his elbow—pulls back the sleeve of his haori like a noble—to guide the brush across the page, there's still a wildness that clings to him, sticks like glue. Izuna remembers Naruto having the same energy, like a pent up storm just waiting, begging, to be released. And perhaps it's just in the same expression too.

Izuna used to watch Naruto like this, used to stare at his face for hours as he honed in on every speck and detail of a seal, brows creasing, mouth furrowed into a slightly frowning line. The worst were the eyes, intense and frightening and flinty, so concentrated he'd always been sure Uzushio could be sinking in the storm and his focus wouldn't break. It was such a rare thing to see in Naruto, to see him concentrate all his attention into one single thing for so long. Or perhaps it wasn't rare at all, and all it took was for him to finally figure it out, the thing that clicked in his head.

And now, Kurama looks the same in all these regards, save for the colors. Gold and blue, sunlight hair and sky eyes, all awash in scarlet. Kurama blink languidly, catching the flickering lamp light in strange ways that cast black shadows and green glows across the surface of his irises.

“What?” He says, a barely there breath that breaks the line of his mouth, shows a bit of his fanged teeth, and Izuna looks away. He stares at the seal instead. It’s the fourth’s flying thunder god jutsu. Kurama’s brush doesn’t hesitate when he speaks, merely slows slightly, gets the ink to blotch a tiny fraction, and then continues on as if it were all part of the plan. “Speak up brat.”

“What did you talk about with Itachi and Jiraiya?” He asks, already itching to get to his main point, but at the same time he wants to avoid it at all costs. “I saw a clone and them over a scroll.”

“We discussed what to do with Naruto,” Kurama sighs. He lifts his brush from the paper for a second before continuing, both his careful calligraphic strokes and his thoughts, “And what to do with Uzushio.”

That catches Izuna off guard. “You’re considering it?”

Kurama’s eyes flick to him, just the briefest of glances before he returns to his work. *Flying god seals could be used to transport people long distances.* “It depends on Konoha,” Kurama looks up at the wall, staring off into some unknown thing in his head, eyes narrowed, “Jiraiya thinks the Hokage will agree to an alliance if he backs me on this. And thanks to your earlier escapades, I don’t have to worry about Danzo trying to sway him against me. But…I’ll *never* become a kage myself. If you want the hat you can take it.”

Izuna balks at the idea. *“Fuck* no.” Kurama snorts, and *now* sounds like the time to tell him. So he does.

“I’m going back to Konoha,” Izuna declares, ripping the bandaid right off.Something shifts in the air as he says it, or perhaps it's his own anxiety creeping in and ensnaring his senses to be hyper aware. He doesn’t know what it is that he should expect from Kurama. They haven’t talked about this too much, they haven’t hashed it out yet, he’s expecting a shit show, expecting, or perhaps a small part of him even *wants* Kurama to growl at him that he’s an idiot, that he’s making a mistake, that he’s wrong. That he should stay there. With Naruto. With the Jinchuuriki.

With Kurama.

Izuna watches his hands. They’re hands that he’s familiar with. They’re Naruto’s hands, that much has not changed save for the tips of his nails pointing into razor sharp claws. Those were the hands that used to beat the living shit out of him, used to fight with him, hurt him, punch him, used to make deadly jutsu aimed for his heart to try and stop him. Later they would help him, a seal on the palm meant to stop all the problems yet to come, a matching sun to his moon. And even later than that, it was those hands that would hold him. Those fingers that would tug gently on his hair or weave braids into it, caress his face whenever they kissed.

And even later those hands slammed down onto his wounds and spared him from death.

Kurama sets his brush down with a clatter, ink splatters across the lip of the inkwell, across the corner of the scroll page and onto the floor. He takes his smudged fingers and wipes them on his forearm, then turns to face Izuna who doesn't look at his eyes. He studies Kurama's hands, which tuck halfway under the cuffs of his massive sleeves. Even without looking at Kurama's face he can still tell that one of his eyebrows is arched. He can tell his chin is lifted so he can look down on him. Maybe, even, there's a sneer starting to creep up on his lip in disdain at Izuna's decision.

"Hn…Okay." Kurama mutters, a bit thoughtful. But to Izuna that simple acceptance might as well be bitter rejection. *That's it? That's all he has to say?*

And just below his shock is an uncurling pit of something horrible. It's been there the whole time, Izuna thinks, just waiting to reveal itself again. He'll be damned to call it desperation, but it's fucking close. He bites his own tongue to keep himself from doing something incredibly stupid. Instead his shoulders hunch a little further, and he finds himself studying the floor instead of Kurama's hands. Naruto's hands.

Through the window, dusky crimson light casts red across the wooden boards. He can see his and Kurama's shadows outlined starkly against the crimson, looking like splotches of ink in pools of blood. Around him there's the quiet sounds of life. The howl of the night's wind rattling through the trees and whistling over the stone and wood ruins. It's picking up, the first hints of autumn finally breaching through the storm perhaps. He can hear Kurama's breaths too, they're faint, almost impossible to discern from the sound of simple existence.

"Is that all?" He hears himself say into the din of that existence. Reality bends itself around those words, words that create meaning, meanings that move things around, move the hearts of people, move the creatures to his whim. But Kurama is hardly a person, and he's no beast to be moved by the likes of an Uchiha, let alone the pathetic sight of Izuna, head hunched into his shoulders and his eyes averted as if he were nothing but a child being scolded. And these words hang like dead men between them, neither moving nor bending, merely existing, as Kurama sits there in his all encompassing silence.

A careful sigh. Izuna didn't realize how close they were until a slight puff of air hit the edge of his bangs. "Yes. You'll go crazy if you stay here, even I know that."

Biting. As always. Like his fangs have sunk directly into the marrow of Izuna's bones and ripped them right out. Blood roars in his ears. He doesn't dare look up to meet the scorn of scarlet eyes piercing right through his thinly veiled agony. It's practically unconscious now, a self preservation mechanism to save him the pain of it. Sometimes he'll slip, when he's so terribly angry at Kurama—when Kurama acts more bijuu than human—it's so much easier to look at him, to see the differences rather than the similarities. There's a part of him, a section of his subconscious, that's still wishing for there to be something else.

But when he plays nice Izuna can't stand it. He'd prefer to hate him, he'd prefer it if they fight because it's so much easier. It's so much cleaner even if it exhausts him. Because the alternative is so *much* worse.

To his own ears his breathing sounds ragged. It comes in tiny short bursts through his nose and clenched teeth, and he has to remind himself to loosen his jaw before it starts to ache. He can barely get enough air. “Don’t pretend you really care about me now,” Izuna goes for an arrogant laugh, but all he manages is something scorn filled and broken.

“Look at me, brat,” Kurama hisses then. Izuna latches onto the tone of his voice, the seething in his teeth that feels of anger rather than anything else. He doesn’t do as Kurama says though. *No.* That would make things too easy. Kurama needs to fight him. The alternative is so much worse.

“I thought you said you wouldn’t push me away,” Izuna parrots off his words, stares at Kurama’s shadow unblinkingly, “If you really want me gone then just say it.” *Ask me to stay. Tell me to stay.* He wants to beg, but he’d rather die than say that. It’s unfair, and stupid of him to spit out these words that he knows are not true.

“You’re the one picking a fucking fight here!” Kurama snaps at him, rightfully so, the correct response to a wild accusation, “What do you want? Do you want me to chase after you like Naruto?”

Izuna’s silence is more of an answer than any words could ever be. He’s supposed to hate Kurama. He’s supposed to hate this creature and this creature is supposed to hate him back. He wants to, in a way he does, he knows he does. It’ll be a long time before he can heal from the wounds Kurama has inflicted unknowingly onto him. It’s not fair to him. But he’s not known for being fair, and he’s not known for being anything but selfish. And now he wants, so desperately he can barely breathe, for Kurama to be more than Kurama.

Most of him understands that it will never happen. Most of him is aware that Kurama will remain. Stubbornly and persistently he will remain nothing more than the nine tailed fox. Because that is what Kurama is. He is not human. He is not Naruto. He’ll never be anything but a demon fox, and Izuna should be okay with that. He shouldn’t expect anything else.

Most of him knows this.

Most.

It’s the tiny sliver of him that doesn’t adhere to any form of logic that runs him in circles, loops his state of mind just how they had looped back in time.

Kurama has had enough of his silence. *“Look* at me, damnit!”

Izuna’s not ready, not nearly prepared for what happens next, even when he catches movement from the corner of his eye and he’s aware enough to startle backward but not nearly enough to escape.

“Don’t touch me-” The words turn to static on his tongue as Kurama’s hands reach up and cup either side of his jaw. Lightning fizzles under his skin, ripples across his spine and the back of his neck, tugs the far corners of his brain out into the open and the rest of him crumbles, breaks apart within seconds as Kurama tilts his head so he’s forced to look. He goes as if paralysed, dazed, he couldn’t move if he wanted to. Izuna is the one with the

sharingan and yet Kurama steals his will from him with just the cold glare of fire-lit eyes and too warm hands.

They're Naruto's hands. Holding him more gently than he ever thought possible, as if it *were* something more than a command or a demeaning gesture between two powerful beings, as if Kurama, within this moment, were more than Kurama. The parts of him that know this is not true recede to nothingness, a buzz of danger worrying in the raised hairs on his neck and nothing more.

"What will happen if you stay then?" Kurama growls at him like it's a threat, but his face remains agonizingly blank save for the slight grimace in the line of his mouth. Izuna wants to punch that look straight off him, but his body disobeys his obvious anger, and remains perfectly still. Save for his heart, which betrays him even more with its rapid pounding, incessant like a drum rattling through his chest.

Kurama moves on before his sluggish brain can think of an answer that isn't pathetic. "What would Naruto think, if he saw you like this?"

Izuna's beating heart seizes up in his throat, choking, clawing its way up and out. He gasps for a breath, for a relief of pressure on his lungs. Kurama's hands loosen around his face and Izuna reacts instinctively. He snatches his wrists and keeps him there, he can't bear to think of how cold the world feels without them burning him. "He *left* me here," Izuna gasps out, "If he really loved me he would be here!" They're lies, but Izuna doesn't care. He's reckless and stupid and hurt. He says them selfishly as if they could mend wounds instead of ripping them open again.

Kurama's fingers curl ever so slightly. They press into his skin, searing down to the bone of his jaw, shooting through every nerve in his body and probably to his soul as well. Imprints, he thinks bitterly, residue left on every fiber of his body, tattooed across his memory. They'll never leave. Kurama tugs him forward, closer until all he can see is Naruto's face and Kurama's eyes. "You may have known him well, but you never saw the inside of his soul. He saved you because he loved you. And, what? You want to throw that away!?"

"He should've known," Izuna refuses to let the tears fall. He can feel them boiling behind his eyes, building up an unbearable pressure that starts to suffocate him. He can't hear his own thoughts as they tumble free from his mouth, "That I can't go on without him."

Kurama's eyes flicker, the fire within them waynes like the moon behind a cloud. Izuna nearly screams at him, nearly thrashes out of his grip as it too becomes nothing but a soft caress on his face. Too gentle, too caring for a bijuu made of fire and malice. But he doesn't. Of course he doesn't. Kurama has him spell bound at this point. He wouldn't move if the entire island of Uzushio collapsed under them.

"You can," Kurama says earnestly in the way Naruto would. Like he really *believes* that Izuna could be anything but self destructive, like he could be good in any capacity. But no. He's not. He's a horrible, selfish person, who does and says horrible selfish things and believes horrible selfish thoughts and lies to himself to feel better about it.

He tilts his head up and shuts his eyes. It's easier to believe he's not here if he can't see the color red, as if he wishes to erase every trace of crimson from his mind, his own sharingan, all the blood he's split and all the fire and embers that rained from the sky as Madara passed through it. He wants to only see blue and gold and nothing more, and pretend none of this ever happened.

"Look at me, Sasuke," Kurama hisses.

Sasuke.

He shouldn't *be* Sasuke anymore. He shouldn't be that thing from the past if he wants to move forward, to rewrite himself as Izuna. Sasuke should be the one in love with Naruto. How can he go on as Sasuke without him? How can he live as Sasuke? Why does Kurama keep calling him *Sasuke?*

"Kiss me." It's Sasuke who demands it. It's Sasuke who keeps his eyes closed as his blood roars in his ears like an inferno. It's Sasuke who grips Kurama's wrists tighter, digs his nails in and refuses to let him go. He doesn't know why he says it, but he doesn't take it back, taking it back doesn't cross his mind even as Kurama stills entirely. His entire existence dims until Sasuke can barely sense him, and the only indication that he's still there are the entirely too warm hands holding Sasuke's face.

Maybe he wants to feel something other than crippling sadness and anger.

Maybe he's just that desperate.

Maybe he's hoping for something.

Maybe he thinks that Naruto could love him enough that he'd return.

No matter what happens, he knows it will be more painful than any wound he's ever been dealt, probably more painful than death itself, but he waits nonetheless for Kurama to do something.

He pulls Sasuke in without grace or mercy, crushes their mouths together with enough force that their teeth clank painfully. He's swept up in it, lets himself fall and crumble and melt into Kurama's violence like lava. It should have been his first warning, blaring crimson just like the rest of Kurama, but he shuts off his brain and falls further and further until he's suffocating, choking on the taste of ash and death and power that wraps around all his limbs and squeezes his lungs. It's all he can smell, it's all he can taste, it's all he can feel.

Sasuke kisses him frantically, desperately, searching. He's the lowest of the low for doing this, for using Kurama to sate his own morbid hopeness, that somewhere within him there could be Naruto. But beneath Kurama's lips are fangs that taste like metal, and beneath that is a mouth that breathes fire down his throat, eating up his oxygen. All he gets is smoke and flames.

Beneath Naruto's skin is Kurama, blazing bright and horrible.

Everything about this feels wrong. It slams into him full force, just what exactly he's doing. His eyes fly open, and all he sees is *red.*

Sasuke shoves Kurama away with enough force that it sends him sprawling onto his side. He catches himself on his elbows as Sasuke drops forward onto his hands and knees. He heaves air into his burning lungs, his head pounding with an intense pressure behind his eyes. His vision blurs and swims, speckles of black fly in and out.

Vaguely, he's aware of Kurama, who sits there as silent as the grave. The room fills with the sound of Sasuke trying to exhale all the ash from his lungs. He doesn't think he'll ever get the taste from his mouth. He blinks down at the floor, watches as tears start to fall and gather into the cracks of the wood panels. It's not just grief this time, but shame. He felt it boiling between his ears, causing him to shake uncontrollably. He forces himself not to vomit.

What have I done?

Feet shuffle, clothing shifts, a shadow falls in front of him. Kurama stands, hovers over him. "I knew it," Kurama spits, sounding as disgusted as Sasuke feels. "This isn't a fucking fairy tale," His voice is low, a rasp of flickering flames, "a kiss isn't going to bring him back either."

Sasuke swallows thickly. He couldn't even look at Kurama before, how is he ever supposed to face him now? It's not often Sasuke feels small, but at that moment he's nothing but a tiny pebble next to a mountain. But he's still Sasuke. Still a defiant piece of shit. Still aggravating and arrogant, and no matter how low he sinks he still feels the need to plunge farther down, dig a knife into his own lungs and twist it. "If you knew…then why did you go along with it? I told you to, but you could have said no if you knew what I was doing!"

Kurama's foot slams down onto the floor, and everything in the room shakes, even the walls and ceilings and the broken blinds in the window rattle with the force. Sasuke braces his arms to keep himself from collapsing then and there. He grits his teeth and keeps his head down like he's waiting to be struck.

But when Kurama speaks it's not fire he hears. It's ice. "And if I didn't, then what? How long would you hope for impossible things? I'm not lying when I say that Naruto isn't here. The only one lying to you is yourself."

Kurama gathers up his things and leaves Sasuke to his lies.

Chapter End Notes

So I KNOW I said I was gonna take a break to work on things, and I swear that was my intention BUT LIKe, this chapter just CAME to me, ok.

God I just hope that Sasuke's feelings are coming through here because it's a bit chaotic as fuckkk. (And Kurama's honestly, he's so fucking cold in this aha but Sasuke hella

needs to get rejected here or shit will get SO toxic SO quick)

The title of this chapter is a line from a poem called "Mad Girl's Love Song" by Sylvia Plath, and It's a very good and short poem and I think it fits pretty DAMN WELL for what's happening here. I highly recommend you read it, though it's totally not necessary (yet it does add another level of angst)

Life is Short and the World is at Least Half Terrible

Chapter Notes

GET READY FOR 7K WORDS OF PURE ANGST AND WAX POETRY ABOUT HOW PRETTY IZUNA IS

And you bitches have been asking for social media SO FINE!! I CRACKED AND MADE A TUMBLR AND TWITTER specifically for this ao3 account (They have nothing in them so far but I will eventually post the artwork from this fic, any artwork for future fics, (and I REALLY want to draw some dumb little meme things that pop up in the comments but they don't really fit the vibe of the fic?) And just normal fanart for the stuff I like in general!)

I do animate, on occasion, so there's a possibility I might animate a fox or two?...that could be cool.

Tumblr and Twitter is both: @Whydieddemon

(I'll figure out links later lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nothing happens for several long hours. Hours that Kakashi takes to unwind all the tension threading through his limbs and threatening to lock him in place once and for all. Itachi uses these hours to contemplate his very menial existence on the roof. He sends crows out towards the barriers, but all of them return within minutes. There's no way for them to reach the outside world. Jiraiya settles down with a spread of different journals and scrolls around him, scribbling away at whatever he's working on.

Kakashi hopes briefly to worm one of his most recent transcripts out of him, but instead he's handed an old, purple scroll with waves lined in shimmering gold. "Where'd you get this?" He unravels it slowly, eyes skimming over the painstakingly precise calligraphy inside.

"Kurama let me borrow a couple of things. Stuff he deemed not too important, but it's good information nonetheless." Jiraiya sits up from his writing and rubs his chin. He smiles fondly off into the distance. "Like a token of goodwill. It seems he's really trying to get along…for Naruto's sake no doubt."

The scroll is about different types of sealing inks. He didn't know there were different types, and voices this to Jiraiya. He gets a chuckle in return and a slight shake to his head. "Neither did I, kid."

So he reads for those uneventful hours. Until the red hued sunlight turns black and blue, and they light their oil lamps and candles. Kakashi can hear the howl of wind and the scent of

frost wafting faintly through the paper doors. Tonight seemed to be the first hint of changing weather for Uzushio, which, up until this very second, has seemed perpetually stuck in summer. But there was a threat of cold on the horizon.

He feels it in earnest when Itachi opens up the door and a gust of wind rattles through the room, fluttering the loose papers and journal pages around Jiraiya, who mumbles nonsense as he tries to pin everything down again.

“How was your rooftop rendezvous?” Jiraiya says without looking up. Itachi quietly pads over to the shelved wall and starts pulling down extra blankets.

“It’s going to get cold,” He mutters in lieu of an answer. Kakashi takes the rolled up blanket ungraciously thrown at him. “I didn’t know it could get cold here.”

“Nothing is impervious to the march of time,” Jiraiya says sagely, “well… *almost* nothing.” He does not elaborate, even when Kakashi and Itachi both stare at him, silently urging him to do so.

Instead they all pack away their things and start to turn in for the night. Itachi suggests one of them keep watch, to which Kakashi volunteers. But Jiraya shakes his head. “It’s not necessary. What are they going to do? Kill us?” He laughs, “They could at any time, and we can’t escape.”

“At least we’d have a chance,” Itachi says darkly, “maybe take one out with us.”

Jiraiya raises an eyebrow. “Get some sleep, kid. And don’t say those kinds of things. We’re not here to fight them. We’re here to make peace.”

Later, he’ll regret not fighting Jiraiya on this. He’ll regret not keeping an eye out and looking over his shoulder.

Because the moon pours silver light down through broken windows, through the paper doors, filling their room with subtle squares of white. And darkness seeps in between the cracks of the hardwood, and descends around Kakashi’s corner. It’s the dead of night when he wakes. His eyes fly open to the sense of utter dread gripping at every fiber of his being. Before he can do anything—grab the kunai under his head, flick on his sharingan, *move a single muscle* — a hand clamps down over his masked mouth, presses all his revolting terror back down his throat like a vile pill.

It’s only then that the darkness breaks around him in the form of glowing ruby eyes. It doesn’t change the existential horror that floods his system, pure adrenaline freezing him up until he’s a useless mind in a trapped body. He *knows* that the chances of Kurama killing him are low, he trusts Izuna enough of that, trusts Jiraiya too, but Kurama isn’t just a fearful person like Orochimaru. He doesn’t weaponize his aura or his chakra in any meaningful way, does not pulsate his killer intent like the snake sannin had done to him to make him freeze just like this. No. Kakashi is starting to believe that Kurama’s not even human, but some wretched yokai born from a different reality altogether.

Kurama tilts his head a fraction of an inch, his free hand comes up and Kakashi tenses even more, but he only puts a finger to his own mouth, urging him to be quiet. Kakashi could barely breathe, let alone make a *sound.* Regardless, Kurama's hand lifts carefully from him, and then he beckons Kakashi to follow with the crook of his finger. Kurama whisks out the door as if he were nothing but a red mist, and Kakashi has to wonder *how in the fucking hell did he get in here without anyone knowing?*

Kakashi stumbles a bit when he rises. His legs betray him and shake as if he were a newborn fawn, and it's the tremor of his own body that stirs Itachi awake and nothing more. *Not the demon that swept through their room like a bloody maelstrom,* but Kakashi's own weakness.

"It's nothing," Kakashi lies, "go back to sleep."

It's clear Itachi is not convinced, but he doesn't follow Kakashi as he tries his best to tiptoe the rest of the way outside.

The cold hits him like a punch to the gut. He sucks in a lungful of chilly air and it helps steel his nerves a bit, enough that he can glare at Kurama, perched atop the roof of his own building, across the wildflower garden, staring at him with these horrible glowing eyes.

"What is it?" He has the decency, or the fear, to make his voice as soft as possible.

Kurama only blinks at him. Kakashi tells himself to not be afraid of such a simple act. That just because Kurama moves and breathes doesn't mean he's about to kill him. And, infact, the more he looks and waits, the more he realizes…Kurama is nervous. Or anxious about something. There's something clinging to him other than his usual restless feral energy. Worry? *Fear?* Kurama was fear itself, what could shake him down like this?

…Izuna.

"It's Izuna," Kurama says just as his brain supplies the answer. Kakashi's own fear of Kurama is replaced by instant worry. Oh. He gets it alright. The certain kind of dread that swoops in his stomach. There's nothing more worrying than an unhinged Uchiha.

"What about him?"

Kurama opens his mouth. He closes it. Kakashi tries not to watch how his fangs glint like rows of daggers in the faint moonlight. A shiver runs up his arms as a gust of wind howls through the stone ruins below them. "I…he's not doing well. Mentally." Kurama looks out into the forest and scowls. "He shouldn't be alone right now."

There's a silent, unspoken request in that. Kakashi's brain promptly short circuits while his treacherous heart does laps in his chest. He starts to say the first thoughts that surface in all the chaos of his mind. "I'm useless in these kinds of situations. Even Itachi's better at comforting people than me." It's a terribly lame excuse, and he hates himself for acting so avoidant in a situation like this. But it can't be him. There is no comfort in Kakashi's presence. He's only ever broken promises and let people down. He doesn't want to let Izuna down as well. "Shouldn't it be you? You know him better than I do."

Kurama's eyes dim, they become the color of dried blood. Kakashi curses internally over the invisible line he's somehow crossed. "It can't be me," Kurama whispers. He lowers his gaze by a fraction, the only time he's ever done so while looking at Kakashi. The only time he's shown even the slightest bit of humility.

Oh. This was…Kurama's fault. Or, he blames himself for it. "Then…" Kakashi fumbles for who else it could be, but Kurama shuts him down with a clawed hand landing firmly on his shoulder. He digs his claw in, not enough to hurt, but enough to be there, present, reminding.

"You don't have to do much," Kurama says, as if he could read Kakashi's insecurities as well as he reads a scroll, "just…bring him back here. Inside. It's cold tonight."

"Do you know where he is?"

"He's at the waterfall."

Kakashi whirls around before he has time to think about what he's doing, or what he's going to do, or how he's going to confront Izuna, or anything at all really. He takes a couple of mindless steps, but then everything, everything he's ever done—every failed mission, every heart he's broken, every friendship he's ended or never taken the steps to start, all his shortcomings and all the death and pain he's caused—catches up to him.

He hesitates.

"You fucking coward," Kurama mutters at his back, and then he's shoved roughly right off the rooftop. Kakashi curses Kurama's name as he falls, but he catches himself in the end, and the momentum propels him forward. He runs into the forest, towards the sound of running water. And it's only then that Kakashi starts to understand Kurama's actions. When he first thought of Kurama, and first saw him and heard his voice and his harsh words and felt the flames of his chakra, he thought of him as a selfish creature. The worst kind of selfish. The kind that took good things and ripped them apart for his own gain.

Kurama doesn't do things people want him to do, but he does things other people need him to, like Kakashi needing to be shoved off that roof. Or Konoha needing to be put in its place. And he bets—deep down he hopes—that whatever had happened between Izuna and Kurama it was something that needed to happen. He wants to believe that Kurama's actions are out of kindness, no matter how cruel they may seem.

So with that revelation weighing heavily in the back of his mind, Kakashi rushes ahead. He's still terrified of what he might find, and prays to whatever god he can think of—he doesn't even believe in gods—that Izuna is okay.

He finds Aka first. The fox rushes out of the nearby bushes at him then bites down on his hand, ears flat against her head, and whines at him urgently. For once, he lets her tug and lead him through the remaining forest tangle out onto the banks of the river. The sound of the roar of the waterfall crescendos once Aka leads him from the forest's edge, and along with it the roar in his ears. His eyes scan each side of the river's banks, but he sees no flicker of a human being, only Izuna's foxes pacing along the coasts. They whimper and yowl at each other, noses pointed towards the waterfall, a cascade of liquid silver glittering under the moon.

And cut between the flow of water is a stark black figure, flickering under the fall. A violent wind shakes Kakashi down to his core.

“Izuna!”

He rockets forward across the river’s surface, going straight for him as he stands like a statue, letting the water pound into his hunched shoulders. When Kakashi gets closer he realizes that Izuna’s staring off into nowhere. He doesn’t know what to do when he reaches him. The mist gets in his eyes and starts soaking his clothes, which only draws more attention to how biting the wind is.

“Hey, Izuna!” He tries to get his attention, but Izuna doesn’t move. He doesn’t even blink while Kakashi shields his face from the harsh sting. He reaches a hand out and doesn’t hesitate this time. His skin stings wherever the water hits him. “Your foxes are worried about you.” He tries again, tries to calm his rabbiting heart rate. *I’m worried about you!* He doesn’t say. “How long have you been standing there?”

Kakashi forces himself to do something about it. Izuna is either freezing cold or in shock or both—it’s probably both. So he grits his teeth and yanks Izuna out of the worst of it by his shoulders. The second Kakashi moves him, however, something must have clicked, and he starts to sink into the river. “Oi,” Kakashi hisses as he’s suddenly dragged down as well. He propels a bit more chakra into his feet and starts to pull him to shore. “you’re not making this very easy.” Izuna still barely responds, though the more Kakashi tugs, the more he keeps putting one foot in front of the other.

Good, at least he’s not completely despondent.

“Help me out a little,” Kakashi mutters. He tries to muster up a half hearted laugh, more to calm himself down than anything else, but it comes out too nervous, which only spirals his anxiety downwards.

Okay…Okay…I can do this, I have *to do this.* He takes a deep breath and shuts off the parts of his brain that don’t matter right now. All that matters is keeping Izuna alive. This is a mission, Kakashi tells himself, Kurama assigned a mission to him and he has to fulfill it. All he has to do is get Izuna back to the house on the hill and then he can worry about other things later.

He takes stock of their current situation. Through Izuna’s soaked and heavy cloak, Kakashi can feel the muscles on his shoulders tense. Violent shivers rack through his entire body every couple of seconds. If he stays like that for too long, he’ll get hypothermia. Izuna’s out of it, but he still moves fairly fine. He’s not physically injured or exhausted of his chakra, just cold. Kakashi could probably carry him if worse comes to worse. Izuna’s foxes crowd around their ankles, but he knows if he tells them they’ll probably go away. Aka has her head held high, pressed under Izuna’s hand poking out from the hem of his cloak as if she were a support. That could be useful.

Or, Kakashi could get Izuna to walk on his own instead of just standing there, hunched slightly, eyes glazed and vacant, like a phantom of a human being. Kakashi flits around him for a second, putting himself directly where his gaze lands. It takes a couple of seconds

before his black eye truly focuses on him, and when it finally does, Kakashi has to remind himself not to dwell on anything but his mission. He locks his trembling hands and beating heart and ringing ears in a box and throws it to the back of his mind.

“Can you walk?” He asks as calmly as possible. “If you stay out here you’ll get sick.” Now is not the time to be doting, he’s sure Izuna would just outright reject him if his voice is anything but emotionless. Pity will get him nowhere, concern will land him in an early grave.

Izuna’s eyes drift, and for a panicked second Kakashi is sure he just lost him, but then he nods carefully. The sudden wave of relief that crashes down on him is enough to make his legs turn to jelly and he practically falls over. “Okay,” He says instead with a heavy sigh. “Let's go.” He leaps forward, but before he can even make it three paces something black and purple swirls directly in front of him. A rip in space opens and his foot falls directly into it. He’s too slow to stop himself from crashing through Izuna’s portal.

Kakashi lands in a pile of futons and blankets and has barely had time to reorient himself before a second crash follows just behind him. He sits up and whirls around to find Izuna crumbled in a puddle on the floor, looking like a drowned black cat, and then several bundles of fur follow through the closing gap in reality. They fill up the silence with the scratch of claws on hardwood floors.

Okay. His mission is complete. That took remarkably less time than he thought. How had he forgotten about the most convenient and frankly annoying jutsu in Izuna’s arsenal? But there’s still problems. Like the fact that water seeps from Izuna’s cloak and infects everything it touches, drips down his too pale face, causes his teeth to chatter, his shoulders to shake, his entire frame to be wracked by uncontrollable shivers.

“I…You need to take your wet clothes off,” Kakashi says. He makes it a point to hastily reach up before he can see his own hands shake and undo the clasp of Izuna’s cloak at the base of his throat. This is just another mission, he thinks to himself. He has to do this as clinically and nonchalantly as possible or Izuna would probably murder him.

He remembers, vehemently, the one time he tried to help Izuna clean up his leg wound. How Izuna has snapped at him like his life was hanging on by a thread. He doesn’t think he’ll get bitten now, but he’s mindful and careful as he slips Izuna’s cloak off his shoulders and goes to hang it up on one of the many rope lines criss-crossing over the beams on the ceiling.

It’s then that he takes a second to realize that he’s never been in this room before. It’s a lot more cozy and lived in than the current room he, Jiraiya, and Itachi occupy. There’s loose kunai everywhere, stacks of clothes along the walls, sandals, backpacks, Izuna’s katana resting casually under a broken window, and a massive pile of jumbled scrolls haphazardly scattered in a corner. Not to mention open pots of ink and blotched brushes everywhere. A child’s rendition of a nine tailed fox stares at him, tacked onto the wall with a shuriken. There's a curtain separating a triangular corner of the room. Everywhere he steps, futons and blankets cushioned his feet save for a couple cracks in between, and the spot Izuna had dumped himself. This was where they all converged, it seems. Kurama, Izuna, and four jinchuuriki, all bunched up into one room like a huge family.

Kakashi doesn't miss it when the door cracks a sliver, and then shuts again. He nearly races out to see who it could be, but then stops himself when he hears the clumsy shuffling of inexperienced feet and whispered 'shhs' and 'let's go' from young voices.

"Kurama told us to stay away from him, he's sick again." Yugito whispers over the din of their complaining. There's a pause in the air as Kakashi waits with his breath stuck in his throat as the kids shuffle ust outside the door. And for some reason he feels inexplicably guilty. He's not doing anything wrong, he knows that, but he's still there, still an outsider invading their space, their *home.* He can only breathe again when he hears their footsteps retreat down the hall, and a different door opening and closing with a snap.

There's no reprieve when he turns back around to find that Izuna has stood up and looks about ready to book it out of there. "Don't you *fucking* dare!" Kakashi snaps at him. He lunges over and catches Izuna by the arm before he can even think about running. Kakashi looks down at the black lines of tattoos across the inner planes of his forearm. His skin is ice cold and clammy under Kakashi's fingers. "Sit down."

Izuna sinks down to his knees, Kakashi leading him with about as much gentleness as he can muster. Which is not much, actually. Kakashi finds himself speaking so he doesn't have to listen to his own heartbeat. "You're going to get sick unless you change into dry clothes." *Don't be a coward now, Kakashi!* He mentally slaps himself before he reaches forward.

Izuna decides now is the time to wake up to reality, and before Kakashi's fingers can even curl into the hem of his shirt, Izuna snatches both his wrists. His grip is painfully tight. Half of him in so relieved that Izuna's not completely dead, and the other half is so incredibly annoyed that he can't do his fucking job right now. "Fine," he says to him, letting his annoyance slip through. He twists his wrists to try and break Izuna's grip, but it seems his fingers have locked in place. *Okay, not fine.*

"Where do you keep your extra clothes?" He waits, as patiently as possible. After what feels like eternity locked in Izuna's grip, he finally relents and motions with his head to the small pile of scrolls behind him. "Okay…" Kakashi tries to move his hands, but Izuna doesn't budge. "Let me go."

"Don't run away." Izuna hisses coldly. Kakashi startles, looks up at his black eye which has begun to live once again. Kakashi nearly retorts harshly, nearly telling him that it's not *Kakashi* who runs away…but that would be false. He's run from as many things as Izuna, he nearly ran from this as well.

"I'm not going anywhere. But you have to let me help you."

Izuna looks away. He's shivering and shaking and only half from the cold. His fingers loosen, just enough for Kakashi to slip away.

"And here I thought that Shisui is the most dramatic Uchiha I've met," Kakashi says. He chuckles at the thought of Shisui's many *many* antics. "But you've really outdone yourself."

He starts unrolling scrolls, hears Izuna shuffling a bit, drops of water drumming down onto the floor. Kakashi focuses on his task at hand and tries not to think about anything else. It all

goes to shit when Izuna practically rips off his shirt and chucks it away. It lands with a wet thump onto the wall and draws Kakashi's attention back to him.

Kakashi looks and he freezes, as if it had been him standing under that waterfall for hours. The first thing that registers is the massive seal tattooed across Izuna's shoulder blade, a stark jet black against moon pale skin, lines of calligraphy curling outward from a single point, marching across his back like rays of a black sun, or black flames. It's massive, covering nearly a quarter of his entire back, lapping over his spine and over his ribs, reaching across the expanse to his other shoulder, and one line of characters disappears to his front. Whoever had done it clearly didn't know how to write that small, but the characters and inked lines themselves are all precise, clean, professional. A masterwork. And the same handwriting as Izuna's other seals. The ink is so dark that it eats up all the moonlight that it touches, like they're crevices etched into Izuna's skin rather than painted on top. They're carved out of his body to reveal something underneath, like Kakashi could dip his fingers into that ink and have them disappear into a different dimension altogether.

He wishes he never looked, because now he can't stop looking. Not even as Izuna tilts his head slightly and Kakashi can see the line of his jaw and cheekbone illuminated in a silver glow. The stark image of him in black and white could be straight from a painting, and Kakashi wants to curse his name because even tragedy looks good on him.

Kakashi's not dumb. He likes to play dumb sometimes, even when in regards to himself. He's known since he came here and saw Izuna leaning against the walls of the Uzukage office, looking calm and cool until Karasu burst in and ruined his facade within seconds, that something had definitely shifted from the first time they knew each other to now. He's not dumb. He knows that he likes it when Izuna looks at him and sees him for who he is. He knows he likes it when Izuna grins at him like he knows all the answers in the universe, and he likes it when Izuna lets his foxes pile up on top of him and he likes Izuna's laugh, and he likes the way his eyes turn to complete stone when he fights, and he kind of likes the fact that this all powerful shinobi still runs away from him (if only it weren't so annoying) and yet somehow still trusts him with enough secrets to create a small mountain.

He's not dumb and he knows he has a stupid crush on this stupid Uchiha.

He's not dumb and anyone who's half blind could see the fact that Izuna's objectively beautiful. In that cool, untouchable kind of way. A lot of Uchiha are. Factually. Itachi will be like that. Shisui will be like that. Kakashi thinks that Obito would've been like that… eventually…If he let his hair grow a bit and if he ever stopped making weird faces. If he had fucking lived.

Kakashi finds the right scroll, finally, and returns to sit in front of Izuna again. "Here-" He pauses when he catches sight of it. A massive spiral scar decorating the entire left side of Izuna's front. While Izuna's back is decorated with the fine black lines of painstakingly accurate artwork, this…this was a sewn and stitched together mass of bone white scar tissue, imprecise and ugly, a true testament to the strength of whoever his opponent had been, and probably a mark of shame for Izuna himself.

"Who did that?" The words tumble out before he can catch himself. He's become so incredibly reckless, and he wonders if it's Izuna and Kurama rubbing off on him in some way.

A few years ago he would never even entertain the possibility of asking such a question.

Izuna reaches for the scroll in slow motion, all his movements both stiff and rigid with frost, but always so calculated and smooth, as all Uchiha move. He goes about unsealing neatly packed away clothes and says “Madara,” offhandedly while throwing on a plain gray shirt with wide sleeves.

The name is enough to send a cold shiver down his spine, but Kakashi is not deterred. “That’s a terrible lie.”

Izuna hums quietly and smiles at nothing. “I suppose it is.” Kakashi doesn’t have time to mull *that* over because Izuna is suddenly stripping off his pants, and Kakashi turns around completely out of sheer panic. One good thing comes out of his utter embarrassment though. Izuna starts to laugh in the back of his throat. Kakashi wants to cover his ears because he knows they’re bright red, but then he’d be missing out on that sound.

Wow, he’s really gone off the deep end, hasn’t he.

“I’m descent.” Izuna says. He feels fingers tapping on the back of his jacket, and Kakashi slowly spins back to face his utter demise. Because that’s what Izuna is, isn’t he? Kakashi’s demise. Who is currently cocooning himself in a blanket, his still damp hair a tangled mess on his head, looking rumpled and exhausted. Despite that the Izuna right in front of him is actually the worst he’s *ever* looked, he’s still infuriatingly, annoyingly pretty, and Kakashi sort of definitely hates himself for having all these horrible, creepy thoughts when Izuna is probably literally hanging onto his own sanity by a couple of loose threads.

Kakashi should go. Logically, his mission is over and he should leave. Izuna should rest, he’s tired enough. Kakashi should check on Itachi to make sure the kid didn’t run outside trying to find him, or go find Kurama to report to him that Izuna’s safe. He should go before his thoughts continue to run away from where he can trap them and stomp them out.

“I…I’m gonna-” He tries to get up. Izuna’s too fast, or Kakashi’s not fast enough, but a single index finger jabs into his shin and effectively pins him there.

“You said you wouldn’t.”

Kakashi hesitates. “I lied.”

“You’re a coward.”

“Funny. Kurama said the same thing before pushing me off a roof.”

That gets Izuna to stop. His head jerks to the side like Kakashi has slapped him. “Did he tell you to find me?” He rasps out between clenched teeth.

Kakashi settles down again. He’s starting to sense that this is going to be a *long* night. Kakashi’s not very good at comforting people. He’s not very good at knowing the *feelings* part of the job. He starts with the facts; the truths, because he knows that Izuna and Kurama are both riddled in lies and mysteries and he’s only gotten a small taste of how they interact

and even he knows that its one of those situations where everyone around them can see it, but clearly these two idiots can't. All the same, it twists his gut to admit that Kurama and Izuna's…whatever they have going on, is a much stronger bond than he'll ever have with anyone. Including his current demise.

He starts with the truth. "He cares about you, y'know."

The truth stings.

Izuna starts to tense up and puff up like a wild animal. His shoulders hike up around his ears, he grips the blanket over his head so tight his hands tremble, and his mismatched eyes go wide and furious. So Kakashi might have said the wrong thing, but it's the truth. He's got a feeling that Izuna doesn't want to hear the truth right now.

(He's got a feeling Izuna never wants to hear the truth)

But then Izuna's eyes shut and he takes one shuddering inhale and one smooth exhale. "Right," He says too curtly. "Of course he would…He's obligated to do so."

"I…wouldn't know," Kakashi admits. "He woke me up and told me to…check on you."

Izuna flops down onto his side, kicking his blanket so it tucks under his feet. He sighs heavily. From where he is now, Kakashi can barely see his face behind his hair and the blanket, but he runs a hand through his hair to shove back his bangs. Kakashi realizes that he's been doing that a lot. He's not hiding his face as much. When he blinks up at Kakashi, he feels his heart seizing up and forces himself to remain stock still. "This is my fault."

"Kurama thinks it's his."

Izuna lifts his head just enough to glare properly at him. "Did he say that?"

"No…? He looked pretty guilty though."

"Hn. Well. what do you think?"

Kakashi pauses. He stares at Izuna whole heartedly until Izuna's the one who looks away finally. "I don't know enough of what happened to make a decision on this matter."

"Do you…want to know?"

Yes. "Only if you want to tell me."

Izuna mulls that over. He lets his head thump down on the futon. And then one moon pale hand emerges from his cocoon and motions for Kakashi to lay down. Kakashi does not for several long seconds. He's confident he's just imagining it. But no, Izuna continues to wave at him until Kakashi carefully, tentatively, lets himself rest on his side, about a foot and a half between them. He can see Izuna's face properly like this, and Izuna doesn't have to crane his neck to look at him either.

Izuna's wearing that yokai mask made from his own porcelain skin and obsidian eye. "Did Jiraiya and Itachi decide when to leave?"

So he's not going to tell Kakashi. It's not his place for Kakashi to know. It's something personal between the two of them then. If it had to do with another third party, Izuna would probably be a little less cagey about it, right? Hell if Kakashi knows, Izuna is cagey about almost everything.

"Jiraiya sent a letter with Karasu. Once Konoha responds, we'll probably leave."

"Not Itachi's crows?"

"Kurama wouldn't allow it. And he said Karasu is faster."

Izuna hums at that and shuts his eyes quietly. There's a long silence that follows, punctuated only by the crickets out that open window, and the howl of a cold wind that sweeps through every now and again. Kakashi is left to study his face, which would be nice if half of his brain wasn't trying to get information from him and the other is completely floored by how relaxed Izuna is after One, almost drowning himself, Two, Kakashi being so close he could reach out and kill him within a second, and Three, he just came back from a spat with another insanely powerful, near-demi-god that left him in a state of complete disarray. Maybe it's the fact that Izuna's so exhausted from it all that he lets his guard down completely.

"Your clan will probably want to talk to you."

Izuna's quiet breaths stutter for the slightest of seconds. It's the only indication that he heard Kakashi at all.

"That's a given."

"They'll want to know where you came from."

"So do you." His tone is feather light. It crushes Kakashi. It's the truth, after all.

"I'm sure you have a lot to tell them."

"Not particularly."

"Itachi wants to talk to you as well."

"I am aware of that."

Maybe its the dismissiveness in his tone. Maybe it's the way his eyes stay closed and he never stutters, never falters, never shows a sign of weakness or vulnerability that he'd been showing literally minutes before this when he'd been reduced to nothing but a shell of a human being. Maybe it's all that. And maybe it's because Kakashi is staring at a mirror of himself, and he hates his reflection more.

"Running away gets exhausting."

“Running is the easiest part, Kakashi. What’s hard is when someone catches you.”

Did I catch you yet? It certainly doesn’t feel like it.

“Why are you like this?” Kakashi says at last, frustration and annoyance edging his voice, making it sharp, making it ring like regret between Kakashi’s head and heart. It’s not something he should say. Not now, and not ever. Not to someone he wants so desperately to know. Not to Izuna, who probably knows exactly *why he’s like that.* Kakashi knows why too, and yet he said it. But he’s tired and he doesn’t know how to comfort people and Izuna makes it so *easy* to dig right back at him.

Izuna’s eyes don’t open. It’s irritating, aggravating, all those ugly words Izuna used to describe himself. Kakashi didn’t believe him when he read that first letter. He thought, mildly, that the Izuna he traveled with was simply exaggerating because he’s a self loathing fool. And then slowly but surely, Kakashi understands that yes, it is self loathing. But it’s also the truth. Izuna *is* all the things he says he is, and he hates himself for it all the same.

Kakashi’s question is ignored, just how he thought it would be. “What do you like about Konoha?” Izuna asks instead, as quiet as the wind. His voice betrays no hurt, no sadness nor fear nor anger. It’s not strained with grief or stuck with unshed tears. If anything, it sounds of understanding.

Kakashi has to swallow down his own frustration before he can speak with the same coldness. “The people,” Kakashi states the obvious. “I like that I can trust my teammates with my back. I like…the training grounds-” Izuna’s mouth starts to twitch upward at that, Kakashi takes that for what it is. He finds himself talking more, and the more he talks the less hurt he feels. “they’re surrounded by trees, a lot like the one here. But… they’re not magical, and they don’t repair themselves…It’s nice, in a way. You can see all the dents in the trees from thousands of training shinobi. You know which ones are yours, and the only thing you know about all the others is that…there’s someone else here, at some other, unknown time, an unknown face and unknown name and unknown connections and unknowns powers…all you know is that these other people come there, the same as you, to train to be better, just like you.”

“Hn.” Izuna nods, his eyes still closed. Kakashi thinks it must be nice to be so fearless, to have enough power that even lying right next to a threat he shuts his eyes off from the world. He thinks he’s jealous, suddenly, of Izuna’s power. Because it lets him sleep soundly at night. Kakashi wakes up constantly, fear coursing through his veins instead of blood. But then he thinks about all the people Izuna had lost, and wonders if his power is a curse instead. Because maybe… having power and failing is worse than not having power and failing. They’re helpless either way. “What else?” Izuna asks.

Kakashi frowns behind his mask. Izuna’s question was designed to distract him. It’s working. “There’s a ramen stand I see Naruto visiting all the time,” At this, both of Izuna’s eyes crack open, peering at him through his black lashes and Kakashi figures out another crack in his mask. Well, it’s an obvious one. Naruto. Of course. “Ichiraku Ramen. Naruto would eat there whenever he could. It’s one of the only places that serves him—no, they welcome him every time. It…reminds me that the world is only half terrible. That’s the half I want to protect.”

Izuna's rinnegan opens just a bit more. Kakashi fumbles for something else to say before he decides to shut them again. "I used to watch Naruto all the time. It's part of the anbu rotation. Itachi and Shisui are also on guard duty when they're in the village," Kakashi remembers a particular thought, he chuckles to himself. "Itachi was always bad at it. He'd get distracted and end up watching his brother instead."

Several different emotions spark up and flash across Izuna's face like licks of fire. Kakashi records and categorizes them all. Surprise, disbelief, anger, contemplation. They roam around his features until they reside into nothing again. Kakashi is too caught up in memorizing every detail that he goes silent, and Izuna shuts his eyes once more.

"Should you really be telling me about your anbu duties?"

"Should you really be letting your guard down around me?" Kakashi snaps right back, a bit harsher than expected.

"I really irritate you, don't I?"

Kakashi could be a bastard and double down on that. But then he remembers why Kurama told him to do this in the first place. Izuna wants him to take the bait, wants to validate his own self deprecation because of course he would. "I just don't understand…why do you trust me?"

"Do I need a reason not to?"

"You've known me less than two months, and a few of those weeks I was actively hunting you. You put me under a genjutsu, you don't know if I'm still mad about that. You keep breaking your promises and making new ones. You let me win instead of taking the fight seriously. You insult me with your actions and your worlds."

Izuna has the nerve to laugh at that. *Laugh.* Kakashi can't decide whether he despises him for it or not. His heart practically sings at the sound of him while all the rest of him revolts. It's too familiar, too kind, too nice. Izuna is self destructive. Kakashi is too. Together, it will only ever be a mess.

"I could kill you right here and now," Kakashi says, because he hates himself. He doesn't even know if it's true.

But then, *then* Izuna, the absolute arrogant *idiot* that he is, opens those horribly captivating eyes of his, both dulled with his exhaustion and black in the low moonlight, he reaches out of the shell of his blanket, and Kakashi's entire body stills like he's made of stone. Izuna is impossible to read until the very last second, when it's too late to back out. And now, Kakashi doesn't know what's happening until it happens. Until Izuna's gripping his wrist tight again and he drags Kakashi's hand forward until his own fingers are splayed out across the center of Izuna's chest. He can feel the rush of blood underneath the palm of his hand, the inhale and exhale of breath, of Izuna's life, thrumming just under his skin.

Blood roars in Kakashi's ears, so loud and desperate that he can barely hear Izuna's request over it. His hand shakes, even while Izuna's fingers dig into his wrist, stabilizing and

destabilizing at the same time.

Izuna smiles at him. It's not an arrogant smirk or a wild grin. It's quiet, and soft, understanding and so gentle it hurts.

"Then kill me," Izuna says and Kakashi hears a different voice, far off and hazy in the back of his mind. This is how he does it, Kakashi reminds himself. This is how he killed Rin. This is how he's killed countless others, faceless assassins, political leaders, missing nin, anyone who got in his way, Kakashi would cut them down, rip out their hearts, let Chidori singe a hole through the center of their chests until they became cold, lifeless things.

Blood starts to seep out from under Kakashi's hitai-ate. It stains the edge of his mask and drips down into the space between them, where Kakashi's arm bridges the same gap as well, still resting over Izuna's still very alive and very rapid heart.

And like a true maniac, Izuna's other hand reaches for him. Kakashi is completely at his mercy as his thumb comes just under the fabric of his headband, and he pulls it up. Kakashi can see his Sharingan reflected in the white of Izuna's eye. Instead of tomoe it spins in a pinwheel. He can see Rin as well, feel her blood dripping down his arm, and feel her body grow cold and numb.

"You're cruel," He finds it in him to say, hissed out between clenched teeth as he tries to focus on nothing but the fact that Izuna is alive and that his own fingers are splayed out over his skin, half his palm resting on the neck line of his shirt.

Izuna is too trusting. He knows too much. And everything he does, he says it's for selfish reasons but it's not. He cares so much that it's killing him slowly. He wants it all. He apologized to Kakashi for hurting him. He wants to rebuild Uzushio. *He knows too much.* He wants to run away from all the people he cares about while at the same time he holds them tighter—he holds Kakashi a bit tighter too. *He knows too much* to not know what he's doing to Kakashi.

Kakashi calls it cruelty, but it's not. This is his comeuppance for pushing Izuna until he did something. This is Izuna telling him that he trusts him with his life, and that's the worst part. Kakashi will never forget this moment until he dies. He'll never forget Izuna's face, exhausted yet determined, how his hair sticks up at odd angles, how his face reflects moonlight, and how dark his eyes are. The cruelty comes with Izuna imprinting himself over Kakashi's horrific memories. He shoves aside the images of blood and lightning and places himself there instead. Alive. Breathing. Under Kakashi's hand. Kakashi will remember this singular, deafening heartbeat among all the countless silent ones.

"I know," Izuna says with a cruel, kind smile, "I learned from the best."

Chapter End Notes

I got a comment 20 minutes before I posted this asking if Kurama/Izuna is gonna be a thing and let me tell you how much I laughed and also I am. So. Sorry.

The part of me that has NO self control wants me to just make them picture perfect and happy but... they just don't work like that. Not yet, at least.

I am REALLY supposed to be working on a portfolio but GAAAH writing this is so addicting! I'm just gonna bite the bullet and put fanart in my fucking professional-i'm-trying-to-get-into-a-school portfolio because I give ZERO fucks and the shit I have is G O O D (Well, not the shit I post here, but my OTHER shit)

Also; The title for this chapter comes from the poem "Good Bones" by Maggie Smith, as always its a short poem and a good fuckin read.

Kitsune and My Brother's Keeper

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a BEEFY 13k words (before I edited it down though, it was almost 25k!)

It's split up into three parts, so if it's too much for one sitting, then you can divide it up like that!

and y'know how in google docs you can command f to search things and it normally pops up right away? Well I've been keeping this as one huge fucking document and whenever I command f it take like a full thirty seconds before it loads. so I had to split it up, that's how long this fic is getting ahah. the first doc is 289 pages lmao I swear I'm trying to keep the word count down and cut out the unnecessary bits, but there's still so much!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Konoha is getting colder. The winds howl at night and rattle the closed windows. The streets are filled with people bundling up in warm sweaters and thick wool pants. Leaves change color, turn from green to yellow and red, then to brown, and then they fall, covering every inch of ground in piles of autumn colors. The nights are filled with hooting owls and stray cats as the crickets and fireflies die out for the upcoming cold. Konoha sits in a changing season, and it holds its breath waiting for the first storm of winter.

Sasuke feels it too, even if he doesn't understand the reason. He knows something is wrong in general. If not the way his father comes home later every night and storms around the house like a black smudge on the bleak horizon. It's been like this for weeks ever since Itachi's village patrols had, without warning, turned into an out-of-Konoha mission that Sasuke had, unfortunately, not been told anything about no matter how much he begged.

It took him way too long the realize that his brother's not going to be home any time soon.

Shisui was gone too, so he could only hope that they were together and doing well. He's young and dumb, and he's worried about his brother so much that it keeps him up at night. The only solace in the darkness is that Itachi will send a crow to their father every now and again. The first time it happened, the bird had burst right through the window and landed in Sasuke's dinner. He barely even cared about the food in that second, only screamed with joy as the bird flapped around helplessly. Because it was *Itachi's* crow, making a mess and acting a fool, and carrying a letter. He'd tried to grab the crow, but it skillfully dodged his attack and went to perch itself on his father's shoulder, who did not look as pleased, but he still did he tell tale sigh of quiet relief, and smiled his reserved, tense smile before excusing himself to read the letter elsewhere.

And good thing he did, because minutes later, while Sasuke helped his mother clean off the mess on the table, they heard the front door bang open, and even Sasuke without any sense of chakra or training could feel the pure rage that left like a whirlwind flying out onto Konoha's streets.

Sasuke knew something was wrong, and the something wrong persisted ever since.

His second knowing comes in the form of what's not there, instead of what is. It takes him a couple of days to really figure out why his classroom looks as dull as the gray skies and brown leaves. It's not like that blond idiot boy hasn't skipped classes before, but normally he'd get caught within the first one or two days and be dragged in unceremoniously, plopped down next to Sasuke, and the next second they'd be at each other's throats.

At first he'd revels in the calm that perpetuates, but then he starts to get irritated. The kid's just…gone, and nobody says a word about it. Then again, Sasuke doesn't say anything about it either. And maybe the quiet only persists in his head, because after a couple of days adjustment, everything around him seems to return to normal.

It all comes to a head when after two weeks of no Naruto and *No Itachi,* he walks into the classroom and finds a black haired kid with a face like a blank sheet of paper sitting in the spot Naruto would normally be in. He stands in the doorway too long, watching everyone crowd around the new kid, until Iruka sensei gently nudges him inside with a "what's gotten into you, Sasuke?" But when he sees this new blank sheet of a person, Iruka sensei freezes as well.

After that, the calm of the classroom turns into a frighteningly intense, uncomfortable silence.

The new kid is named Sai. Only Sai. He tells them he was never given a last name. For the remainder of his time, he stares blankly at the wall and doesn't listen to a word Iruka sensei says, but when he's spoken to he smiles like a porcelain doll. No one really likes him, but he's not trying to be liked. Sasuke *almost* hates him. Maybe it's because he's just another blob of dark color in the classroom.

Something is just *wrong.* Sasuke can feel it, and he thinks he might be going insane because when he tells his mother that something is *missing,* she sits him down and asks for him to elaborate, and when he tells her that there's this idiot kid in his class that hasn't been there for two weeks and he thinks that's why everything's *wrong,* she hushes him soothingly and tells him that he just misses his brother and to not worry about him or the kid named Naruto.

He knows that though! He knows he misses Itachi, and it hurts and he's terrified the crows will one day stop coming and Itachi will never return! But Itachi has left for longer, has sent less crows than this, and he's not *worried* about Naruto. He doesn't know how to worry about a kid like that, who pretends he's invincible and thinks Sasuke is his rival even though whenever they fight Sasuke pummels him to the dirt. He's just so much more aware of the fact that Naruto's gone.

And he thinks that he's truly insane, or maybe he's just gotten better at sensing chakra, because he swears he feels his heart tugging him a certain direction. Whenever he gets close

to Konoha's walls, however, some shinobi or another will tut at him and tell him to go home.

He tries genuinely sneaking out once and gets caught by his father, who has to carry him over his shoulder screaming and crying back home. His parents sit him down and gently try to get him to tell them what's gotten him so upset and the worst part is that he doesn't even know! He begs his father to tell him where Itachi is instead, and when he gets denied, he asks about Naruto. The storm that descends onto his father's face is terrifying and Sasuke knows then that he's asked too many questions.

His mother, bless her, breaks off their intense staring match and pets his head, tries to smooth down the awkward strands of hair that stick up in the back, and tells him not to worry about Naruto. He snaps and tells her, violently, that he's not *worried* and the second he sees Naruto's face he's going to beat the daylights out of him because *he's* the problem, he *just knows that Naruto is the problem here!*

His parents exchange quick glances. His mother asks if he wants to stay home from school for a few days and Sasuke's anger bubbles over and he slams his bedroom door.

His father tells him off the next morning before he disappears for work that they don't slam doors, and even if he's angry and scared (he's not scared!) that it's important to think things through rationally. After a quiet and muffled apology, his mother tells him to help him in the kitchen and he does with a pout, but after a couple of hours of kneading and separating dumpling dough, he calms down enough to realize that he should be in school by now.

He stays where he is.

And it's then that the strangest thing yet happens.

Their kitchen has a long and wide window that they normally keep closed. But the weather today had been okay, and sunlight streams unbroken down into the kitchen, lighting up particles of dust, shining down on Sasuke's face and he tirelessly pulls little balls of dough off the larger piece, then flattens them out onto a plate. He's not looking up from his work, too focused on the task at hand, when he feels a particularly strong gush of air flutter his bangs. His heart pounds, knowing that feeling of a bird swooping into the window, and he smiles when he looks up, expecting Itachi's crow perched on the window sill.

What he sees makes all his skin prickle with lightning.

The creature stares at him with black, mirror-like eyes. It's standing on the narrow ledge of the window, perfectly balanced, it's outline a stark black shadow against the sunlight. Sasuke gapes at its two tails, both tipped with silver and swishing to and fro. The creature is beautiful and elegant, and Sasuke has never seen it before in his life. He stands quickly from the table, abandoning his task, but he can't bring himself to move forward or back. He's terrified that the creature will flutter away if he tries to reach out to it.

In its mouth Sasuke sees a thick green scroll. It's patterned with leaves, adorned with fancy looking golden tassels, and clasped shut with the konoha symbol. It looks important.

He opens his mouth, about to call out to his mother in the other room, then stops. The creature's ears flick at him, it tilts its head curiously, then in one graceful move, it slinks down into the kitchen. Its claws scrape on the floor and it's the loudest sound he's ever heard. Sasuke gasps, falling over as it comes right up to him, and he scrambles back until he hits the wall. It doesn't even hesitate for a second as it sniffs at him. Sasuke's heart pounds wildly in his throat and he shuts his eyes as a tiny wet nose brushes his face. He hears it snuffling for a while, its sniffing breaths puffing coldly onto his skin.

But nothing happens. Sasuke peels open his eyes as the creature backs away and stares at him unblinkingly. When it doesn't attack him, Sasuke reaches his hand out, and it noses that too. Sasuke giggles, the creature's ears rotate forward again and it mimics his sound. Sasuke laughs harder, it chuckles around the scroll in its mouth and Sasuke sees its glinting silver fangs.

Emboldened by the fact that the creature had come up to *him,* he carefully lays a hand on top of its head and pets its silky fur. He runs his fingers over its velvet-like ears, marveling at how soft they feel. He's never seen a beast like this before. It looked like a wolf or a dog, but it was smaller, and its face was narrower. He digs through his animal knowledge. "Are you a fox?" its tails swish, Sasuke thinks it's happy. He sits there and pets the fox for a couple more seconds.

"Sasuke!" He hears a shriek. Both he and the fox look towards the sound, to where his mother stands in the hallway. The fox spins, faster than Sasuke can speak. It races out the window. Sasuke clamors up and tries to catch it despite his mother yelling at him. He sticks his head outside and can only stare as the fox *jumps into the air* and disappears in a crack of lightning and streaks of flickering purple. Seconds later he hears a boom of thunder.

A sharp hand lands on his shoulder and whirls him around. He gets thrown into a stiff and tight embrace, but he pushes her away, annoyed and disappointed.

"Mom!" He whines, "You scared it away! It was friendly! It let me pet him! And he was carrying a scroll! What if it was for me?!"

His mother only looks at him like he's lost his head.

Outside, rain starts falling.

* * *

Itachi thinks his crows could be faster than Karasu. He's wrong, of course. That fox flies on lightning and purple fire, while his crows fly on feathered wings. He tells himself that it's practical for Kurama to use his own messenger. Not only will a flying fox with two tails immediately catch the attention of the hokage and council, but he is, actually, faster. And Itachi wasn't allowed to even touch the fabric of the scroll before it was sent off. Kakashi

wasn't either, to be fair. But Kurama had asked Jiraiya to be the one to write it so that Konoha at least knows that they're still alive and kicking.

Itachi understands the reasoning of this as well, though he can't help but notice that Jiraiya writes his own set of code into the letter. He can't decipher it; he doesn't have the key, but someone in Konoha definitely will.

He tells himself all of this. And still, the impractical sliver of himself seethes at being denied use of his crows. Infact, he's been denied use of all his shinobi tools and his eyes, and he's not allowed to ask Izuna to spar even though *Kakashi* did *and* he won and now Izuna is going back with them. Kakashi didn't tell them this, which, fair he guesses. And instead it was Kurama who had told them over a bonfire dinner. Itachi had been pressed between a black cat that seemed to like him and a wild tanuki on a beaten up old couch, dragged into the middle of the street.

They eat at the bonfire every night now, waiting for Karasu's inevitable return. Yugito, the Niibi's jinchuuriki, is the one who does most of the cooking. (Once, the younger jinchuuriki bullied Izuna into doing it, but he only caved when all of them promised to leave him alone for the rest of the day) Yugito is around the same age as Itachi and when they both realize this, they go about mutually ignoring each other. At least, it's mutual as far as Itachi's concerned. Yugito doesn't bother him, he doesn't bother her.

It feels like he's not really allowed to speak to the jinchuuriki without Kurama present, especially Gaara and Naruto, who are the youngest. Fuu kind of does what she wants, old enough to know caution, but young enough to not care about it. She came up to Itachi one day and demanded that he show her the proper way to do the fireball jutsu, because apparently Izuna taught her the wrong hand signs. Itachi ends up explaining that, no, her hand signs are correct, but it's a difficult jutsu to perform if her nature isn't fire.

Itachi catches the jinchuuriki chuckling to themselves often, or even talking to the air, and it takes him a couple of hours to figure out that they're speaking to their tailed beasts. He didn't know they could do that.

Currently, they're around the bonfire once more. It's been four days. Naruto, Gaara, and Fuu are sitting on a log closest to the fire, while he, Jiraiya, and Kakashi sit behind them on mismatched chairs and cushions. On the couch this time is Yugito, sprawled out across the entirety of it with that stray black cat curled on the back rest, and one of Izuna's foxes in a ball at her feet. Izuna himself is nowhere to be found. Which is pretty typical of him, especially because Kurama is here, and he's been avoiding him particularly hard for the past couple of days. Itachi is certain that Kakashi knows what's up, but he doesn't spill even when Jiraiya tries to pull rank on him.

Kakashi doesn't spill. But he also doesn't pretend that he's been trying to follow Izuna around like a puppy for the last hower-many days. The only reason he's here right now is because a swirling vortex dumped him at Itachi's feet about twenty minutes ago. Then the fox, the silver one with a black toe, had fallen out as well and sat on him before he could get up and jump back through.

Kurama is currently storytelling something that sounds more like a fairytale than history, though it's actually the story of the Uchiha and Senju and the birth of Konoha. Itachi wonders how he knows so much detail about Hashirama and Madara. He acts like he'd witnessed these events himself, even punctuating their epic battles with his own Uchiha-styled fire balls and dragon flames. His outline is stark and black, with his back to the fire, and his eyes glowing red when he speaks about the sharingan and everything it can do.

He's good at it; storytelling that is. His voice is naturally deep and echoes in Itachi's ears like the drone of rolling thunder or the roar of a fire. At first he thought it to be terrifying, he still does, but it's the kind of voice that's perfect for narrating the sheer scale and epic nature of the battles. And he uses chakra as if he were made of it. He rolls embers between his fingers —when he emphasizes a point with his hands, sparks fly from the silver edge of his claws— and a constant stream of fluttering butterfly fires escape his mouth every other word. He appears to be made of them.

He tells them about two boys who skipped rocks on the water. About two families who hated each other. About death and fire and love. And then he speaks about a second son named Izuna, *the first Izuna,* who died as a result of Tobirama. And how that death had awakened Madara's Mangekyou. Kurama starts speaking about soulmates and reincarnation. He holds his palm out to Naruto with a pinprick of white light in the center, and tells Naruto that he's the sun and every sun needs its moon.

Kurama speaks about an endless dream.

At first, Itachi didn't understand how Izuna could follow someone like Kurama. He saw how they fought, saw how easily they pissed each other off and how that escalated into physical violence, and how easily Izuna threw Kurama away. How could they work together? How could Izuna still look to Kurama and await his direction? Itachi gets it now. He watches how Kurama enchants everyone with his mere existence. It's not even a genjutsu and Itachi finds himself hanging onto every word he says.

He doesn't realize he's so engrossed with the story that his mouth hangs slightly ajar until Kakashi nudges him gently, his eye all too knowing. Itachi snaps out of it and tries to return to subtly absorbing all the information around him.

"It's okay, y'know, you can relax," Jiraiya says to him, "if they wanted to hurt us, they'd already have done it."

He wants to tell them that he can't, because he's still on mission even if he's broken the anbu rules already by taking his mask off. Kurama doesn't let him wear it around him, saying it's too easy to hide his intentions. In the background, Kurama shouts, "and then-!" Itachi hears the telltale *whoosh* of flames, and in the corner of his eye he sees Kurama's entire form erupt into bright orange. The kids break out into a joyous cacophony as he dances around dressed in fire.

"He uses chakra to entertain kids," Itachi says, more to himself but his teammates listen. "while he invites strangers to sit at his fire and eat his food," The words tumble out, one after the other as Kurama scoops up Naruto, and the kid laughs as the fire tickles but doesn't burn him either. "He says he hates Konoha, but never killed any of the anbu following him."

Jiraiya just hums. “That's an Uzumaki for you. And then they’ll insult your entire family and threaten to maim you.”

Kurama spins Naruto around and the two laugh. The flames turn a brilliant gold, as bright as sunlight and he finds himself squinting. Itachi can feel the wave of warmth from here. Not just the warmth on his skin, but he *feels* the love that Kurama radiates, like he’s never felt it before, and it scorches a path down to his soul.

For a brief, inconsequential second, Itachi thinks about how on earth he was ever meant to separate these two. Why would Konoha ask them to break them apart? *This mission was doomed from the start.* And the guilt that crashes down on him does not last a second. It lasts a thousand more and grows like weeds, crawling over his skin, wiggling into every doubt he’s ever had. He tries to fight it, to tell himself that he’s doing his duty. *He’s just following orders.*

And then Izuna’s voice rings like a bell in his head, *“Would you say the same if it were Sasuke?”*

And his thoughts are not so inconsequential anymore. If he was Kurama and Naruto was Sasuke and the world was trying to pull them away from each other, if the world tried to force him to give up his brother for the sake of power… He couldn’t do it. He’d run. He’d fight. He’d throw everything he had to make it stop. He’d kill anyone for Sasuke, and for Kurama to precisely *not* kill…Itachi doesn’t know if that says more about Kurama or him.

Itachi wipes his eyes before anyone can see him break down completely. There’s a pressure building behind them. He doesn’t want to accidentally spin on his sharingan and ruin the beautiful scene before him so he gets up and excuses himself, doesn’t miss the way Kurama’s eyes track his movements, but he doesn’t say anything to him. Itachi’s certain it’s because Naruto starts pulling on his hair and loudly declaring that he and fuu *need* to braid it or they'll simply die.

He turns his back to the fire and decides to go find somewhere quiet. He’s sure a Kurama clone will start stalking him soon. Itachi made it a habit to go snooping for trouble while he’s here, but the most important things are impossible for him to access due to barriers, and whenever he tries to follow Izuna Kurama will pop out and stop him. Which annoys him greatly, but he won’t complain. He did ask yesterday as to why Izuna was practically off limits if your name wasn’t Kakashi, and Kurama told him that if his intention is to bombard questions at him about his clan, then he’ll have to wait until Izuna comes to him.

Which…fair enough. He *had* been planning to do just that.

Itachi thinks of himself as pretty patient. So he stopped trying to follow Izuna even though every time he catches a glimpse of him, he wants to get the drop on him and scream, *just what is it that you know!?*

He doesn’t go back to their room and instead goes further into the Uzushio ruins. He’s been creating a map of it in his head, though it would be a lot faster if he were allowed to use his sharingan. There is something alluring in walking down these broken streets, tragedy marked in the smallest of things, like the fluttering burned banners on the market squares, or the

homes that nature has embraced. Itachi kind of likes the wildness of it all, though it's not a practical place for kids to live.

Itachi steps over shattered glass and crumbling foundations and a toppled statue. It's head is missing from it's shoulders and he finds it on the next street through the jagged edges of a window. The murals on the walls are stained with what Itachi first thought was blood, but realizes that it's just ink. They're half-done jutsus and unfinished seals, telling the story of desperate shinobi who's lives had been cut before they could finish their final hurrah.

It's a lot colder than he thought now that he's away from the bonfire. He uses a bit of chakra to heat up his lungs and puff out a quick fireball. His long sleeve shirt was left in the room. He didn't think Uzushio could get this cold. He always thought it was a tropical island, that the storms kept the frost out. Well, the storms bring their own chill, and Itachi is an idiot for thinking otherwise.

He finds himself at the foot of the administration building, the first place Kurama had taken them, and the first place they'd *really* started talking. Well, they'd thrown a bunch of insults at each other, and then Izuna threw Kurama through a wall. And it was only then that Itachi truly believed that Izuna wasn't fully under Kurama's thumb. Itachi runs up the wall until he reaches the very room, still with a huge chunk of concrete missing in the rough approximation of Kurama's height. He slips inside quietly, careful to avoid the sharp corners of the broken windows. There's nothing particularly interesting about the room itself, only what it could be. What it had been. It's present state is total disarray. Itachi thinks it could look nice. *Presentable,* even, if Kurama worked hard enough.

There's huge claw marks decorating the table where Kurama had sat. Itachi doesn't remember those, but they just paint another picture. Of Kurama's anger being taken out on inanimate things. Much like the wall. Itachi runs his fingers over the deep gashes in the wood. The edges were seared and blackened. Itachi makes a note to one, *never* face the brunt of those claws no matter what, and two, ask Kakashi what it felt like when he got shredded.

Itachi hears it faintly while he's thinking; a slight shuffling, then something shattering, a string of muffled curses that could only belong to one man. Itachi looks over his shoulder. There's no Kurama clone here. He hasn't been followed this entire time. It's an odd and fascinating thought, that he could go anywhere on the island for one night and no one would be looking, yet somehow he ended up in the same place as someone else. Someone who could watch him.

Itachi peaks his head out into the hallway. It's wide with a tall ceiling, and rooms line either side. All the doors are either firmly shut or busted wide open. He sees a faint light in a far off corner, and goes towards it, noting the three foxes lounging around the entrance. Izuna's curses get louder.

"That fucking idiot…don't eat that-I *said* don't…I swear they were here…Aka, I can see you…that looks important…What do you have? *Spit that out."* There's a growl, the fox laughter that haunts Itachi's dreams, and then Izuna comes tumbling through the rectangle of waning lamplight, wrestling a glass jar out of his fox's mouth. "That's a *sealing jar* you moron! You don't know what's in there!" Izuna pries her jaws open and it falls.

Itachi reacts on instinct and lunges forward to catch it before it breaks. Izuna doesn't say anything, he doesn't really acknowledge Itachi, doesn't give a thanks besides a short, "hn," and then tries to pluck the jar from Itachi's fingers. Itachi's grip tightens minutely, and it's only then that Izuna looks down at him with a raised eyebrow. The fox at their feet bites at Itachi's pant leg, and he ignores it in favor of openly staring directly into Izuna's dark eye. It's like looking into a mirror.

Then Izuna spins on his heel and makes his way back into the room. He doesn't give Itachi any indication to leave, which all Uchiha know and willing take as an invitation to follow. He ends up behind the fox who wedges her way between his legs. The other foxes wait outside. The room turns out to be a large storage closet. It goes back several meters, with different rows of shelves housing varies weapons, tools, and of course a large amount of sealing scrolls, collections of jars that look identical to the one Itachi clutches tightly in his grip, bottles of ink, calligraphy pens, uniforms, and tucked along the back wall are a collection of yokai masks—anbu masks.

"It goes here," Izuna points to a shelf just above Itachi's eye level. At his feet there's a broken clay jar leaking glistening black ink. Itachi replaces the glass jar.

"Do you know what it does?"

"Nope," Izuna reaches to where Itachi had placed it and shoves it farther back, out of the reach of foxes. Speaking of which, the fox wiggles around Izuna and picks up a mask from the wall. Izuna sighs, long suffering and low, but doesn't stop her this time. He just continues rummaging through the shelves, opening drawers, shuffling around stacks of loose paper and scrolls, sifting through the armor and clothes.

"What are you doing?"

Izuna distractedly answers him, "I'm looking for something."

Clearly… "Do you need help?"

"No. I thought they were *here."* Izuna kicks a crate on the ground, it rattles. Then he bites his thumb nail and glares around. His foot starts tapping and he doesn't finish his thought. For a while, Itachi is content to just watch Izuna track and backtrack through this mundane space. It's a stark contrast from the god-like powers and knowledge he possesses. Like this, he looks incredibly human with a pinched, annoyed expression and his constant under-the-breath mumbling, not to mention his fox, Aka, continuously getting under his feet, which he ignores or simply affectionately leads her away by pushing her snout, not even looking at her.

"You've been avoiding Kurama," Itachi says, expecting a reaction, hell, a part of him expects to be flung through a portal and land at *Kakashi's* feet with a fox sitting on *him.*

What he doesn't expect is Izuna to only grunt as he moves a large footlocker out from under a bench and says, "yep," while popping open the clasp. More questions are raised with that simple word than answered. When he opens the chest, a cloud of dust wafts up. They both cough.

Izuna starts dumping things out while muttering, “why do Uzumaki keep all their good clothes hidden like this? They’re shinobi, yet they insist on wearing bright colors.” Itachi thinks about Kurama’s blood red haori that practically glitters even in the dead of night, of Naruto’s yellow shirt with a huge orange swirl on it and his orange pants. He smiles to himself while Izuna continues to fling clothes on the ground, all practical shades of brown and green. At the very bottom, even Itachi could recognize the piece of fabric. Izuna’s hum of satisfaction confirms it. He pulls the white piece of cloth from the pile and then hands it right to Itachi. His hands close around it automatically as he reads the huge turquoise lettering, it shifts colors just like the waves on Izuna’s cloak.

Uzukage.

“This is… Kurama said he wouldn’t.” Itachi glances up at Izuna as he walks past him to the other side of the room. It hits him that this is only the second time he’s spoken to Izuna alone. The first time had ended in disaster, left him obsessed with this stranger, and absolutely furious. He’s determined to keep things as civil as possible. If he fucks up he’ll probably end up like Kakashi; portaled back to the bonfire with a fox sitting on him. Wonderful.

Izuna starts from the top of a new shelf and pulls down wooden boxes. Each is filled with different pieces of armor or weapons. “Yeah, well, I don’t care what he says. It would be so much easier if he was Uzukage. Konoha would probably take him seriously.”

“That’s what I told him…” Itachi mutters.

Izuna glances at him from over his shoulder, scoffs to himself, and continues with his search. Itachi folds up the kage cloak and holds it to his chest. Izuna had handed it off so casually. He’s *acting* so casually. It should be throwing him off, but Itachi prefers this Izuna to the one he’d met in their minds. It reminds Itachi that this is a member of his clan. Even if he doesn’t know Izuna personally, they’re bonded through the burden of their family name. What’s more; they’re bonded through the sharingan’s power and what that means to achieve such power, through hardships and trauma and loss. Itachi can look at Izuna’s eye and know that he’s the same as him.

While Izuna is preoccupied, he decides to snoop around. It shouldn’t be this easy to turn his back to a stranger, but it is. He picks up a yokai mask off the back wall in the shape of a cat and holds it up to his face.

“Put that back,” Izuna says. Itachi looks up to see he’s abscently flipping through a storage catalog. He’s not even facing Itachi’s direction, and for a second he gets an image of his mother telling him the same thing when he was a baby and rummaging through his father’s office. He’s sure he’s said and done this exact move to Sasuke on numerous occasions while his brother tries to find the secrets hidden in his room.

“If you put that on you won’t be able to take it off for six hours.” Itachi puts the mask back and inspects the seals painted into the edges, they’re so tiny and made of ink only a shade darker than the paint itself. Itachi has worn his mask for much longer than that, but the thought of having it permanently stuck to his face during his shift is…unimaginable.

And cruel.

Izuna flips open yet another box and rummages through a collection of what appears to be fancy senbon containers. He puts them on the floor and crouches down next to it. He opens one curiously, and then licks the metal needle.

“That could be poisoned,” Itachi starts forward, hand raising, *to do what, exactly?*

“It’s a paralyzing agent,” Izuna says without a hint of hesitance or fear. He continues on as if nothing’s happened. Itachi soaks in that information quickly and quietly. Izuna is immune to poisons. It shouldn't be surprising at this point. He twirls the senbon between his fingers and narrows his eyes at the tiny thing, then they flick to Itachi and he has to squish his instinct to attack first. Because Izuna just shakes his head and puts the weapon back in its fancy, swirl covered casing. He tucks them away into the folds of his cloak. Great.

“I almost died to a kid wielding these,” Izuna says offhandedly, gesturing to the remaining containers, “he woke up my sharingan from it’s long slumber.” Izuna smiles like it was a fond memory instead of traumatic. Itachi listens, rapt at attention. From all of Kakashi’s complaining, he’s gathered that Izuna doesn’t share much about his past. Anything will do. *Anything even if it's inconsequential.*

“I still have to return kubikiribocho,” Izuna’s smile turns to a frown, “damn, I nearly forgot.” Itachi can’t follow this one sided conversation. Izuna looks at him with a flat glare. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re disappointed you didn’t get to hear my fantastic tale of woe. If you want stories, you should’ve stayed to listen to Kurama.”

Itachi blinks, absorbing this too. He thought he was good at listening. He should’ve realized that every little thing Izuna says is information, even if it’s not the full story. “You were at the bonfire,” and to himself;

His sharingan was awakened then remained dormant for a while. A kid reawakened it, and unless it was a really powerful kid, the reawakening probably happened when he was younger, which means the first time his sharingan manifested, he was even younger than that. Kubikuribocho is a sword from Mist. Did it happen in Mist?

“I dropped by to snag my dinner and dipped when that maniac started showing off.” Izuna says under his breath. Then he turns around and starts loudly pulling out boxes filled with rattling shuriken. He drops the boxes from a too-high height and doesn’t care when they hit the floor and the contents leap over the open tops and spill onto the floor. Itachi kneels down and gathers them up to put them back, careful to trap the kage cloak between his chest and leg to keep it off the ground, then he pushes the boxes to the side so no one trips on them.

Izuna is definitely doing it on purpose. Probably at the second mention of Kurama.

“You want this maniac to be Uzukage.” Itachi flicks a speck of dust from the letters adorning the cloak.

“As much as I never want to see his face again, he’s the best shot they’ve got.”

“At what?” Itachi doesn’t let his use of words slide. Izuna takes himself out of the group. He’s not a part of ‘them.’

“Peace…quiet...freedom.” Izuna stands on his toes and peers into the back end of a deep set shelf, then he reaches his arm into the dark corner of it. He looks at Itachi as he does this, his face curiously blank. “He might seem like a scary demon…but…” he tugs out a gray and dusty duffel bag, then plops it down between them, looking smug. Itachi and him sit down on either side of it, Itachi feels a stab of burning curiosity as to what could be in here. Izuna continues to speak as he tries and fails to get the zipper unstuck.

“I mean he’s fucking *horrible,* who am I kidding?” Izuna’s expression twists suddenly, annoyed and terrifying. “He’s a selfish jackass who doesn’t understand *anything,”* Izuna takes out a kunai, “and he’s stupid beyond belief but he acts so high and mighty and it sucks because he’s *fucking right* all the damn time!” He stabs through the tough fabric and drags, “But *no* when it comes to his *own* anger it doesn’t matter! It only matters to him when it’s somebody *else’s* trauma, then it’s the fucking end of the world unless he tries to fix it! I didn’t *ask* him to fix me damnit! *AHA!”*

He rips open the bag, they both lean forward to peer into its contents. A thousand metal rectangles stare back up at him, each one riveted into a strip of black fabric. Itachi picks one up and wipes his thumb over the swirl carved in the center.

“And if that bastard wants to act like a kage, then maybe he should take the title too.” He looks up sharply to Izuna who grins at him with all his fury, all his arrogance, and all his pain shining through. Itachi is reminded of what those civilians said in Steam country. Many people who saw him thought he was a kitsune, a yokai dressed up in human skin. Itachi had forgotten about it because if anyone were the yokai it’s probably Kurama. But Izuna makes a damn good impression of one too.

* * *

Karasu returns, and Izuna knows that his time is up.

He’s been avoiding the inevitable, putting everything off until the last second, and now the last second is happening. He’s not too late, not yet. He hasn’t spoken to Kurama since that day. Instead he waited it out, and so did Kurama.

The last few days, his thoughts are consumed by that evil chakra demon named Kurama. He doesn’t know if he should call Kurama’s actions *kindness* or not. Regardless, Izuna has to come to terms with the fact that Kurama doesn’t hate him at all, and Izuna also kind of doesn’t. It was shoved down his throat first from Kakashi, who outright said it, then his own brother who implied it heavily. Izuna’s so lucky Itachi didn’t comment when he’d finally exploded out of sheer rage. But it was the truth! Kurama acts like he sits on a cloud above

their heads and refuses to admit that his own hatred is clouding his decision making. And now that Izuna can admit to himself that what happened was a bit fucked up, but in the end Kurama was right, now he can focus on *tearing* Kurama from his perch on his cloud and bringing this near-deity down to human level.

His level.

Karasu returns and Izuna's immediate reaction to high tail it to the most desolate place he can find. He tells himself he can do it. They don't even have to talk about *what happened.* They don't have to talk about Naruto. Izuna will just give him the cloak, the hitai-ate, and be on his way. He can leave Uzushio and live out his days hunting Akatsuki until the end of his time. He can train with Kakashi, reconnect with his clan, figure out if mini-Sasuke is as much of a brat as he remembers being, and forget about the kiss that is still eating away at him every goddamn second.

He needs to forget about Kurama.

The taste of ash lingers in the back of his throat. He's never using a fire technique ever again.

Karasu returns and Izuna spends his last day on Uzushio lurking around in the shadows while Kurama speaks to the konoha ninja about their plans to return. It's not his proudest moment. He should be waltzing into their room and plopping himself down next to Kurama so they can discuss things like actual people. But he's a coward and the thought of seeing Kurama, let alone sitting near him, fills him with more dread than Madara even did.

Enemies he can handle. It's not hard to think up a strategy to defeat an opponent. Allies are worse, friends even worse, and whatever the hell Kurama is, that's the worst one of them all. With Naruto it was always easy, but Kurama is just a time bomb and anything Izuna says or does could set him off, and before he didn't really care that much, but now it's clear to him that he doesn't want that either. He doesn't want to keep Kurama a world apart, but he also can't keep Kurama close to him either.

So he lurks and pretends like he doesn't hear Kakashi asking if he should be here to discuss these plans too, and Kurama telling him that he's already here and being a coward. He pretends like Kurama doesn't know where Izuna is at all times thanks to the fact that the stupid bijuu is incredible at sensing chakra, that they have a tattooed seal that binds them together regardless, and that their practically intune to each other thanks to Kurama still residing in Naruto's body, and the fact that Kurama simply *knows* him. Izuna hates it.

So they make their plans to return, and Izuna is given the task of portaling them across the ocean, once they make it past the barriers. He can't object (a two-days-long travel in the blink of an eye? That sounds like a huge chakra drain) because it'll give away his position. He sends an angry flare of chakra through the seal. If Kurama wanted to, he could use it to latch on and teleport himself to Izuna's exact location, but he doesn't. He doesn't do anything but growl and clutch at his shoulder.

Izuna doesn't miss the way Kakashi zeros in on the movement and his brain immediately starts chugging. Great. He'd almost forgotten all of the embarrassing shit he did after the

Kurama situation. It was all a hazy blur in his mind. He's almost glad he was so out of it that he can't recall much.

All he remembers is being cold and Kakashi looking at him like he was something worth looking at. Then Kakashi followed him around for the last few days, and whenever Izuna caught him staring for a little *too* long, he'd flick him away with a portal. Izuna tells himself that it's just the usual nonsense. If it's just the usual nonsense he can handle it.

Which is why it's hard to deal with the likes of Kurama, because he is anything but the usual nonsense. Mostly because he acts like he hates Izuna with a burning passion and then will do shit like sending someone to make sure Izuna's not alone, and having enough foresight to not make it *himself.* Or giving Izuna room in order to collect himself. He doesn't try to corner Izuna once, even though it's clear as day that he's *waiting* for Izuna to confront him.

It's the worst.

Izuna doesn't know how to handle it.

The only thing he does know is that Kurama's behavior is proving one thing to him; that he'd make a decent Uzukage. Now…if only he knew what to say in order to convince him.

Karasu returns, he's leaving Uzushio, and he can't bring himself to say goodbye.

So Izuna doesn't say anything. He finds a secluded rooftop somewhere where he won't be bothered by the likes of anyone save for Karasu, who he can call upon with just his voice and the fox will show himself (proving that Kurama is still continuously keeping an eye on him, ever since Konoha's forests, ever since these foxes came to him in the first place).

He rolls out a scroll and writes a letter.

He details everything that he can't say. Izuna is so used to being able to fight to let out his anger. He's so used to Naruto, who would understand him even if he never said a thing. He's been spoiled his entire life, and now he has to try or everything will slip through his fingers and shatter onto the unforgiving ground.

He pours out his thoughts with paper and ink and thinks it's fitting when he's in a place like this. His mouth can't speak, but the ink on the page does. Because he's sitting in Uzushio, a quiet place with a lot of words. They're painted on the ground. They're splattered across Izuna's skin, they're written into scrolls, storing power within the lines of characters, chakra stored within seals, and now Izuna seals his thoughts into these words too.

It's not perfect; writing a letter instead of a direct confrontation. He knows it's a coward's move. He can't face Kurama head on, he *can't.* His entire being revolts at the idea of standing in front of him again and having to say what he's thinking. He won't be able to handle the scrutinizing glare of Kurama's red eyes, for the angry frown that fits so oddly on Naruto's features, or whatever scathing words Kurama will say back.

Izuna is a coward.

He doesn't know when he became such a coward.

When he's done, he seals it shut and hands the scroll to Karasu, who takes it gingerly, like it's the most precious cargo he's carried to date. Maybe it is, it's got a piece of Izuna's heart in there as well. "Don't you fucking *dare* give that to him while I'm still here, got it?"

Karasu's ears flatten as if to say, *but what if he tells me to?* "Do not!" Izuna snaps at him, then quieter he mumbles, "please." Karasu blinks his glassy black eyes and leaps away. Izuna's heart lurches as he watches that black fox bound off into the encroaching shadows.

There's still more loose ends he needs to tie up before he goes, but it's like a huge weight has lifted off his shoulders.

He can pinpoint Naruto from across the universe, finds him sulking around the training grounds while Gaara and Fuu hack at each other with enough force to make the ground tremble. Yugito lounges in a tree, watching them. Naruto is the first to notice Izuna's arrival and he get dive bombed by seven Naruto clones, they stack on each other's shoulders to get at Izuna's height, but it takes nothing but a light breeze and they topple over again, a pile of giggling, laughter than dissolves into smoke.

It's the hardest thing in the world trying to let go of Naruto when the kid tackles him into a fierce hug. He tells them that he's leaving tomorrow and they all gang up to fight him. They tell him that if they win he has to stay. It's a more than tempting offer and he keeps up the charades for quite some time. That is until Yugito joins the fight and calls him out on his bullshit. She tells him that they can't win even if it's eight on one, and Izuna proves her right by pinning them all to trees, hanging by the collars of their shirts.

Izuna stays in the field and trains with them until night creeps around and then he lets them use a portal to fall back into their shared room. Yugito and Fuu go to their secluded corner, and Gaara makes his sand into a nest before tugging over his favorite from the stack of unkempt blankets. Kurama has yet to return, so it's only him and Naruto standing in the middle of this mess of a room.

Naruto tugs his hand, he looks down at him. "Why are you going?" He whispers.

"You know…I'm an Uchiha right?" Izuna whispers right back. "My clan is in Konoha."

Naruto's bottom lip trembles. Oh no. His bright blue eyes start to glisten. *Oh no.* "L-like Sasuke?"

"Yes. Like Sasuke. And Itachi. They are…my family."

"Is…are we not your family too?"

Ah. Fuck. Izuna sits cross legged in front of the sniffling boy. "You are," Izuna soothes him, tears fall. He can't handle this. How is supposed to wake up tomorrow and leave this all behind? But then again, how is he supposed to stay? Thankfully, Naruto's too exhausted from training all day to deal with this right now, and instead of bursting into tears, he ends up

swaying on his feet and Izuna tells him to go to bed. They can talk tomorrow if he really wants to.

Izuna himself can't sleep.

He stays awake and watches over Naruto. At some point, his foxes nose through the front door and swarm around Naruto in a big fox pile. They've been hanging around Naruto more and more, and Izuna's almost relieved. He shouldn't drag these foxes anywhere they can get hurt…he needs to leave them on Uzushio. They love Naruto, that's clear to see, and Kurama can understand them better than he can.

The only one who doesn't curl up with Naruto is Aka. Faithful as ever, she comes up to him and helps him gather up all his scattered materials and seal them away for easy transportation. He polishes his katana while he waits for daybreak. He's always felt calmer under the eye of the moon than the glare of the sun. It's cooler at night, it's the calm before the daybreak, the in-between of new beginnings. Izuna can sit in the moonlight like he's made of it, bask in it, the moon is for him and no one else.

Kurama comes slinking back into the room even later. They pretend to ignore each other. Izuna is too tense, and he can't even try to go to sleep until Kurama gathers up some loose papers and mumbles about going to the library before he leaves again.

He's aware of the crickets, of the leaves on the trees losing their color, of the faint shuffling of the konoha shinobi settling down for the night. Itachi sits on the roof just outside, he's been doing that since they got here. He likes to send his poor crows bouncing off the barrier every night, hopelessly trying to get a message back to his clan. Izuna could open the barrier for him if he really wanted to face Kurama's wrath. He'd been granted access to the barriers the same time he was granted access to the library, about a day before the konoha shinobi arrived.

He could let his brother send off a crow, and watch it explode against the second barrier too.

Something about it is incredibly lonely.

Is he thinking about Sasuke?

Is he thinking about his parents?

Is he thinking at all?

Izuna polishes his sword, tests its edge on a strip of cloth, and sheaths the blade. Itachi sighs, long and heavy like he's thirty instead of thirteen before he slips back into his room. Izuna can pick up the faint voices of Kakashi and Jiraiya asking about what he's doing, and Itachi doesn't answer them like usual. They all go to sleep eventually, or at least they stop making sounds.

Eventually, dawn arises.

Eventually, Izuna stirs from his sitting position. He'd shut his eyes, but he couldn't tell if it was actual sleep or a lull in his consciousness. His body is stiff and annoyed at him for not lying down, but he ignores it as he gets up and stretches. Aka also jumps up with her tail swinging. The rest of the foxes sleep on.

Dawn arises, and Kakashi appears in his broken window. *Why is this one always on time?* He's starting to prefer the Kakashi who would stall for hours.

Everything is happening too quickly…

"I've been instructed to fetch you." Izuna glares at him. Kakashi snorts, "You look half-dead."

"Funny." Izuna turns away and stares at the sleeping Naruto, bundled up with all of his foxes. He shuffles closer, not wanting to disturb the scene. Kakashi's shadow falls onto them, blocking the golden sunlight from hitting its mark, but Naruto still shines as bright as the sun, and surrounded by orange and silver, he looks to be encased in flames and ash. When he reaches out, his foxes awake around him, but even they know not to move. Naruto sleeps on, cuddling Hokori close to his chest.

He gives his foxes a terse look. "Protect him for me?" He asks them gently. Because foxes are wild things, and all he can do is ask. His foxes whine, several pairs of black ears flatten in their concern. But they don't move. Naruto has them in a vice grip.

He reaches out and touches Naruto's forehead, which causes his golden eyebrows to wiggle downward. Naruto wrinkles his nose, but he doesn't wake. Izuna tears himself away before he can do anything else. He turns his back. Kakashi's eye is also trained on the sleeping boy, but he blinks away whatever affection is there to scowl at Izuna like he's the devil.

"They'll listen to you just like that, huh?" Kakashi says. He leaps out of the window and Izuna follows him. "I thought you said you can't control them."

Izuna takes a deep breath. He refuses to look back as they run through the ruins and towards the beach. The second he does, he'll never leave. "You can only ever ask."

"Guess that applies to Uchiha as well, since none of you ever do as you're told." Kakashi's eye tilts up into his famous bullshit smile. Izuna shoves him hard enough that he nearly crashes headlong into a tree. He doesn't feel bad about it, not when Kakashi comes right back to his side seconds later, absolutely grinning behind that mask. Izuna shoves him again, but he dodges this time. "But seriously, if all goes well, then Naruto can visit Konoha sometime. Kurama would let him if you're there, wouldn't he?" Kakashi says with a bit of naive hope in the tilt of his voice.

It's so different from what Izuna expects out of him—this younger version or his Kakashi sensei, he doesn't know—that he nearly trips over his own feet. Kakashi catches this as well because he's always looking at Izuna now-a-days. He does not like to be under the scrutiny of Kakashi's keen eye and even better sharingan. But he has himself to blame for all of this anyway. Because he pushed himself into Kakashi's comfort zone and now he has to live there, apparently.

“There’s a chance,” Izuna says to answer his question. “But Kurama despises Konoha on a fundamental level,” he looks Kakashi in the eye, just so the man knows he’s serious. “He would have every right to raze Konoha from the face of the Earth, but he chose to make peace with them instead.”

“He chose to make peace because you urged him to.”

Izuna shakes his head. “He did it because his love for Naruto outweighs his hatred for Konoha.”

Kakashi’s eyebrow furrows. Izuna can sense the objection so he picks up the pace and makes it to the beach before Kakashi. Jiraiya, Itachi, and Kurama are all there. And next to Kurama is Karasu with Izuna’s scroll. He glares down at the fox, willing him to go run away, but to no avail. Dread courses through him and thet thought of that treacherous fox doing the exact opposite of what he’d asked.

But when he gets close enough, Kurama growls at him. “What the hell did you tell Karasu? He won’t let me take the scroll and won’t stop repeating the phrase, ‘Izuna told me not to’ like a fucking prayer!”

Izuna shrugs, feigning nonchalance while his insides twist and turn as violent as a storm. “I told him not to, clearly.” He can feel the tension winding around them like lightning. Kurama glowers, but he eventually turns away with a huff, and goes to address the konoha shinobi.

“Well! This certainly was entertaining,” Jiraiya claps his hands together, then he nods his head in an impression of a bow while both Kakashi and Itachi actually lower their heads properly. Itachi slips on his anbu mask once again.

“Thank you for understanding our circumstances, and for calling a truce with Konoha,” Itachi says much too formally.

Kurama waves them off. “Yeah yeah, we’re tentative allies or whatever. I can’t believe I have to think about *visitation rights*… what the hell am I? A divorced parent?”

Jiraiya laughs, loud and boisterous as always. “I don’t think it’s very good to keep children locked away from the rest of the world, so to speak. Let them explore.”

Kurama’s eyes narrow. “I think you’re about ot step over your bounds, *Jiraiya,* so I’m going to firmly remind you that you’re the bastard who left a kid without a parental figure for seven years of his life.”

Ouch. even Izuna winces. But it’s the truth. Jiraiya rubs the back of his head and chuckles awkwardly as everyone, even Itachi and Kakashi, stares at him unforgivingly. “You see… Kakashi I can’t kind of understand, because he was still a teenager when Naruto’s parents died, and going through his own shit-”

Kakashi startles, “How did you-”

“-but *you,* on the other hand…” Kurama trails off, then, “no matter, leave my sight before I get mad.” He waves them off, dismissing them.

There’s a short chorus of mumbled ‘goodbyes’ and Itachi bows again before the three are trudging down the beach. They hope over the first couple of waves and continue along. Kakashi is the first one to hesitate and turn around.

Izuna hasn’t moved from his spot.

Kurama is aware of this fact too. He levels him with an even stare that Izuna can’t meet. “Do you have something that you want to say?”

Izuna’s eyes dart to Karasu. To the scroll still ever-so-gently placed between his teeth. He could say it now. He could burn that scroll and just pour his heart out, bleeding crimson just like Kurama. He could stop being a coward.

Izuna opens his mouth. “I…” the air tastes like fire. “I’ll…see you on the other side.”

Kurama’s eyes narrow. He studies Izuna for a while. Those words mean almost nothing, but they’re everything. What’s on the other side? What *is* the other side? Of this barrier, of this world, of this time? When will he see Kurama again? When will Kurama leave this place? Izuna doesn’t even know if he’ll get the chance to return.

He could die tomorrow and his regrets will be stacked to the moon.

The wind picks up and Izuna can smell the salt and sea, the cold front that has blasted through Uzushio these past few days. “Goodbye, Izuna.”

Izuan allows himself a second to absorb those words, and then he’s running. Out onto the ocean, towards Kakashi and Itachi and Jiraiya. Towards Konoha. He’s running from something. From the creature standing like a flame, piercing red eyes on his back. Kurama must know that things aren’t finished, that Izuna has left him with too many strings attached, that he had wanted to say so many things, that this can’t be their goodbye.

Izuna regrets it the second his feet hit the water, but he can’t stop now. He forces himself to keep going, to not look back. He keeps his eye trained on the uchiha fan just barely poking out from beneath Itachi’s anbu vest. It’s grounding and fills him with both relief and dread. He hasn’t seen it for a very long time, it’s a shock to his system, cold water in his veins.

When they make it to the first barrier, Izuna does his part. He flashes through hand signs and then pulses his chakra, watches as the slightly red-tinged wall ripple into a flash of purple before it splits open just enough for one person to slip through at a time. He sees Itachi looking over his shoulder, past Izuna as to whatever is behind him. He sees Kakashi do the same, but he doesn’t. He slips through the barrier and continues on.

The Konoha shinobi frequently check their backs, it’s a habit for them as much as it is for Izuna to *not.* They make it through the first three barriers without incident. Eachtime Izuna opens one up, the storm gets progressively worse. By the time they’re almost through, all of

them are soaked and cold and miserable, but no one says a word about the discomfort. Not even Jiraiya, though he looks just about ready to crack an awful joke.

And that's when the axis of the world shifts.

Izuna feels it, a spike of burning chakra through his seal, so bright and painful that he loses his concentration and falls halfway into the waves. He picks himself up before anyone but Kakashi can see. There's concern burning bright in his gray eye, but Izuna waves him off.

"It's nothing-" He's cut off by another. It's like flames racing under his skin, running rampant through his nerves, and it's so not *nothing.* The worst part is that he knows *exactly* what this means. And if he were any smarter he'd send a chakra pulse back and Kurama could pop up right beside him and they could hash it out right then and there. But Izuna's still a coward, and if he ignores this blaring pain that's near paralyzing, if he can get through this last barrier before Kurama inevitably catches up to them, then he can forget about all of it.

He stumbles forward. He needs to move *forward,* even though it's like there's a tether to his shoulder wanting him to so desperately go back. Kurama is calling for him, screaming at him, brandishing his silver claws down his back to get him to *listen,* and Izuna is good at ignoring it, he really is, but it's insane just how *horrible* Kurama can make his chakra burn.

"This is *not nothing!"* Kakashi hisses, "what's happening?!"

"It's *nothing."* Izuna hisses out between clenched teeth, "just…go," He tells them, even though they're stopped because they can't go any further either. Izuna stands on shaking legs and opens the barrier for them.

"Go on," He says. They tentatively pass through. All but Kakashi, who's suspicions are high.

"Don't run away," He says, a mimic of those words Izuna had said to him in a half-delirious state. Izuna looks up at him sharply, Kakashi doesn't waver.

"I won't," and he means it. "Just…give me a minute."

Kakashi backs out onto the other side of the barrier, and Izuna shuts it. He sends a twinge of his chakra racing out through the seal on his shoulder, and finally, *finally,* Kurama tugs on the thread he's given and the magic works like always. There's a pop and ring in his ears as time and space warps over his shoulder. It's a flash of white, and Kurama is *there,* real, and *furious.*

There's a scroll being shoved into his arms, it's torn open and nothing more than a long line of fabric and paper in his hands. There's a brief second where Izuna expects to get shredded into tiny little pieces, or to at least have to defend himself. But the seconds turn to tens of seconds, turn to minutes, and nothing happens.

The wind blows. Kurama is staring at him with the cold blanket face of a statue, and all of his words have been given back to him into a disorganized pile. Izuna looks down at the mess in his hands, all his jumbled up words and complicated feelings pouring out and slipping through his finger tips, then back up to Kurama. Izuna can't read his expressions at all, even

when he spins his sharingan and studies him, all he gets are the minute twists of anger or confusion.

Something has to break.

Something has to give.

Of course it will be Izuna. He rolls up the scroll and lights it on fire. It turns to a blackened and charred mess in his hands. He dumps the soggy ashes into the storm. “I couldn’t say it to your face, okay?” He snaps, sounding way younger and immature than he hoped. But it doesn’t really matter does it? Because no matter how old Izuna gets, he’ll always be a stupid little kid to Kurama.

“I gathered,” Kurama mutters. He’s quiet. The kind of quiet that threatens to become a storm. Everywhere around them, the storm brews. Under Izuna’s skin he can feel his chakra reacting to the natural lightning around them. The rain pours, hissing off Kurama’s own chakra, making his form radiate a layer of steam.

And then Kurama relents. He sighs. Everything about him crumbles like he’s been held together from fire alone and now that it’s raining he’s been put out. He pinches the bridge of his nose and looks down. He tucks his hands into his sleeves and pulls something out.

In the wind, Izuna’s breath is stolen from him as he watches it unfurl. watches as black cloth unravels and flutters like streamers. There’s a howl through his head, the air whipping around them as the storm rages silently on. The waves crash, the whirlpools swirl, Izuna’s head and heart go still.

Glinting between Kurama’s silver claws sits a spiral hitai-ate, an *Uzushio hitai-ate.*

“This is what you wanted, isn’t it?” Kurama mutters. Izuna’s hands twitch. He stares at his own warped reflection within the metal’s surface. He can’t believe how wide and terrified his eyes look. “You’ve been hanging around foxes so much you’ve become one yourself. I told you to go. I should have asked if you wanted to stay…The outcome doesn’t matter, it’s being offered the choice that counts, isn’t it? It’s being told that you have a place if you need it?”

Izuna looks up, finally, to meet Kurama’s eyes. He looks determined, maybe a bit pissed off that Izuna didn’t just say anything like a functional adult. “You can only ever ask…” He repeats the thing he’s been telling Kakashi for weeks. And here, the nine tailed fox stands, and Izuna’s never asked anything of him. Only demanded, only told him to do things and it’s a miracle Kurama relented everytime.

“Will you be the Uzukage?” Izuna asks this time, instead of telling him.

Kurama snorts, then his lip curls. “Don’t push your luck, take the fucking headband.” Izuna does. It’s a cold and heavy weight in his hands. He doesn’t really know what to do with it. “You don’t have to decide now.”

“Good,” And the tension along his shoulders dissipates. He breathes a sigh of relief. “because I don’t think I can.”

Kurama scoffs at him. And then he does something unexpected. He holds out his fist to Izuna. At first, he thought he was about to get punched, but Kurama doesn't bring it down on his face or casually shove his shoulder or sock him in the gut, he holds his curled fingers there between them like he's reaching out to him. Izuna doesn't understand the gesture.

Then he growls. "Just fucking fist bump me you moron!" Kurama shoves his hand closer.

Izuna jolts back. "Why?"

"Naruto, I swear I'm going to strangle this kid. We can do *this,* or we can sit here in front of your friends and talk about our *feelings.* Those are your choices, you understand?"

Ah.

Izuna is not talking about *that* out loud where Kakashi and Itachi can and have obviously already been reading their mouths this entire conversation. The barrier blocks out sound but it doesn't distort vision enough to where they can't pick out their words. Luckily, Kurama hasn't said anything too damning, like using his name or something.

He curls his hand into a fist and barely has it raised before Kurama knocks their knuckles together. There's a jolt of fire through his hand and for a second he doesn't know what happened, but then it's like his entire body starts to buzz and hum with power. Kurama just gave him a bit of his chakra. And it's not blindingly bright or scorching hot. It doesn't smell like fire or taste like ash. It's not enough to manifest a cloak or anything. It's just… there, pleasantly warm under his skin. *Kurama* is just there, and for once he doesn't feel like a thorn in his side or a huge gaping wound in his heart of an inferno trying to eat up all the oxygen in his lungs. Kurama is just existing within the same space as Izuna, and suddenly he *gets it.*

Izuna didn't bring Kurama down to his level. Kurama brought him up to his.

Izuna knows everything he needs to know about Kurama, about him, about them. Within the spark of a second, he knows without a doubt that they're okay. Those words don't need to be said, that he understands, and even further than that. Izuna understands that this is what the connection between a jinchuuriki and their bijuu is. This is what Naruto's connection to Kurama was, and he's blindsided by how…simple it is. It can't be that simple…can it?

And he's struck with a sense of immeasurable guilt. Because while Izuna was looking for Naruto in Kurama, Kurama was probably looking for Naruto in *him.* Maybe not Naruto, maybe just the same kind of bond they shared…and Izuna tarnished whatever Kurama was looking for with his own grief.

"I'm sorry," He hisses, it tastes like salt and seawater on his tongue. It sounds pathetic, not a proper apology to his crime. He knows he doesn't have to say anything, but at the same time, he *does.*

He hurt Kurama. He told Kurama to do something awful, and Kurama *listened* to him because he thought it would help him. In a twisted way, he did it because he cares about Izuna. That's the truth that Izuna's been so reluctant to face, but he has no choice now. Kurama cares about him in the same way he cared about Naruto, in the same way he cares

about little Naruto and all his jinchuuriki siblings and his bijuu brethren. Kurama doesn't know how to care about people in any other manner. It's his *purpose* to protect them like this.

He curls his fingers tighter around the hitai-ate and clutches it to his chest.

"You don't have to say anything," Kurama's claws wave about them, Izuna is hardly aware of them, only he knows that they won't hit him, like he's aware of his own limbs. "I already know, and you do too."

Izuna looks him in the eyes and knows that this is the truth. He doesn't deserve all of this, but Kurama knows that too, and still gives it to him anyway. He's allowing Izuna to be selfish, to take what he wants without repercussions, to demand things of him that are unreasonable and *still* Kurama gives. He gives Izuna a place to belong, a place to return, a place to call his home.

And all Izuna has to do is selfishly take it.

* * *

Kurama,

I am a fucking coward, I'm pretty sure you already know this. It doesn't excuse my actions, or why I've been avoiding everyone. It's just the truth. The truth is I'm terrified. I'm terrified that Konoha will take one look at me and decide to brand me a threat, slap my face in the bingo book, and I'll be on the run for the rest of this pathetic life. I'm terrified of what my clan will say to me, I'm terrified I'll never stop seeing Itachi killing our parents, and when I see them again it'll be like seeing you. It'll be like living those memories over and over.

But apparently, I have to go. I sealed my own fate, I'm not denying it. It was my fault. I wanted Kakashi to win. I don't even know why anymore. I guess deep down I know I have to leave. Everything that happened that day just confirms it. I can't stay here, I should never have returned to this place. I should have stayed away from you, and Naruto, and the rest of the jinchuuriki. This is a life that I want, but I can't have it. I'm not the type.

It wasn't ever just the fact that you're in Naruto's body, y'know. You always look like him regardless of your color, but it hurts just as much whenever you extend any sort of comradery. You try to play nice, and I guess it just makes you more human than kyuubi. But then again, you've always just been you, I guess the kyuubi is just more human than I thought. The kyuubi no kitsune is more human than I am.

I used to think we were similar. I used to think you were just the selfish kyuubi, just like me, and I could hate you all I wanted without consequences because you hate me too. But that's not the case, isn't it? You don't hate me. You don't see me the way I see myself.

I'm lost, I know I'm lost. I admit that I'm lost, that I don't know where to go. Everyone is telling me to go to Konoha, but I don't know. I told myself to go to Konoha, but I don't know. It feels like I just ran out of options. What if I go, and everything falls apart? This life is my second chance. My first was nothing but regret and a never ending cycle of revenge until Naruto pulled me out of it. I don't want this life to be just revenge. I want to do what I have to, and then I want to stop. I don't even know what it means to stop. I don't even know if you know what it means to stop either, but I want you to figure out what the hell you're doing too. It's not just me who's acting like a total idiot. Heed the advice of the people who have been people longer than you have. I heard Itachi tell you this too, but you need to become the Uzukage.

It's not about your strength. It's not about all the kages who have come before you. It's not about the villages that have wronged you. It's not about any of them. This is about Uzushio, and you, Kurama. This is about Naruto. And your precious jinchuuriki and bijuu family. They are your responsibility, Kurama. They rely on you to protect them. They rely on you to bring them together when they're lonely, and for you to love them when they feel unloved. This is your duty that you put upon yourself. This is the duty of a kage. And no one will see that unless you show them, unless you tell them otherwise. Konoha will step all over you if they think that you're not willing to protect your family with your life. And should Uzushio expand, everyone who flocks to this place for the sanction of its barriers will also be yours to protect. This is the weight that comes with power, and I think you already know this.

I think that you already understand that this is your burden. You wished to give freedom to your family, and shackled yourself instead. This is your curse.

I'll be out of your hair soon so it doesn't matter to me, but I have some things that I won't be able to do in Konoha that need attention. I'm leaving my foxes with Naruto. I'm sure they'll fare better here than on whatever battlefield I'm dragged onto.

And I'm leaving Kubikiribocho and that unnamed Mist Akatsuki member. I know you're eventually going to free the Sanbi from Obito. If you return the sword and body, you can get the village to pay you. And that might seem stupid but if you really intend to rebuild Uzushio, then you need money. I'll also leave most of the ryo I got from Sasori, his puppets, and Kakuzu. I think the first thing you should buy is salt. Because all your food is fucking bland. And plant a garden. No, infact, the first people you should get onto that island are farmers.

Regardless of what you do, the kids need to be exposed to the rest of the world as well. Don't keep them locked up on that island forever. That Uzumaki with the boat might be a good first bridge between Uzushio and the port village we came from. If anything, let them explore. Especially Naruto. He'll get lonely talking to the same five people…and also, I think he might get lonely without Sasuke around. He still gets a sad look whenever he talks

about him. And stop making Yugito cook everything, one day she's going to poison your food.

If this happens to be the end, then I wanted to say that I'm sorry for causing you trouble. I'm sorry I can't let go of Naruto. I'm sorry that I dragged you into my grief when you're going through your own. I'm sorry that I never listened to you. I'm sorry that I'm not apologizing to your face like I should be, or leaving all these things how they are.

But I've been running all my life and I don't know how to stop. I don't know where I should stop.

~Some Art~

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to make parallels with this piece of art huh, get it, there's a 'fox' and an Uchiha in each, with Izuna being the metaphorical fox inbetween heheheh (ALSO WHEN I WAS MAKING IT EVERYTIME ID SCROLL UP AND SEE THE FUCKING ADORABLE LITTLE SASUKE MY HEART. GUYS. I DREW IT AND MY HEART CANT HANDLE HOW FUCKING SQUISHY BABY SASUKE LOOKS OK AND IM NOT EVEN A KID PERSON)

This chapter both healed my soul and did so much fucking damage y'all, holy shit, It took me so long to figure out how I wanted to write it, and then I made the art BEFORE i fished the chapter so I boxed myself in and had to shove EVERYTHING into Izuna's POV, from him and konoha making their plans, to him agonizing over Kurama, agonizing over what to do with Kakashi, Karasu returning, them packing up, him saying goodbye to the kiddos, dropping off the foxes for Kurama's doggy day-care, and the f i n a l confrontation which I TOTALY did not forget about the whole fist-bump chakra-sharing-we-have-the-same-braincells-jinchuuriki-bullshit until literal seconds before I wrote it,

(and its been so long since I watched the show that I don't even know nor care if thats how it actually works this is fanfiction my guys and Kurama and Sasuke are now a queer platonic relationship sorry i dont make the rules; wait a minute yes I do. Is it gay to fistbump an ancient fox demon so he can know your entire soul inside and out instead of kissing him because he looks like your dead boyfriend? Fuck if I know?)

The Sharingan Clan

Chapter Notes

> HELLO!!! It's been a while-- this semester is KICKING my ass ok-- I'll talk more abt it in the end notes for now just ENJOY!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Izuna dumps them back onto the piers of the port-side village in Steam, the first thing he notices is the light layer of frost swirling through the air. It's mixed up in the water, churning layers onto the stony beach beneath the wood docks, and ripping through the fierce wind with a vengeance. Not only that, but the sky is gray and blotchy, promising rain but never delivering. Everything around him is damp and cold; from the creaking wooden boards under his feet, the slick sides of barnacle crusted boats, the people in their water-clinging clothes looking miserable, to the air hanging with the mist-and-frost. Izuna himself is blessedly dry thanks to the remnants of Kurama's chakra still swirling under his skin, faint and waning. The frost that hits his face sizzles off of him.

The second thing he notices are the people. Around them the everyday bustle has halted—if only for a minute to gawk at him and the three shinobi materializing from a black hole in front of them—and an uncomfortable silence descends across the pier. He hears them whisper all too loudly, calling him things like 'kitsune' or 'yokai.'

To hunch his shoulders and cover his face would only make it worse. To stand there and take it would only make matters worse. And to leave, right then and there with a body flicker and a swirl of leaves? That's the worst.

And that's exactly what they do. They leave in a body flicker and a swirl of leaves, gone from sight and still Izuna can feel a few sets of eyes tracing him to their new location atop the buildings. He shakes the thought like he shakes the stray raindrops from his hair.

Beside him, Itachi sends out his murder of crows. They disperse in all directions, including a few that fly off from the immediate premise, off to Konoha no doubt. The rest are to find the scattered Anbu forces Itachi is convinced are still hanging around here.

While that happens, Izuna sits down on the hard slatted roof and focuses on the wavering feel of Kurama's chakra darting underneath his skin. He used a good chunk of it on his portal; there's barely enough left to do anything but keep him vaguely and contently warm. Izuna wants to cling to it. He wants to bury it deep within his soul and keep it for himself forever. But of course, this chakra that's not his own doesn't obey him. If he uses chakra at any time, it'll be Kurama's that answers the call first. He stares down at his hand as if he could see the golden yellow glow of that familiar chakra. He doesn't. All he sees is his own pale skin and the faded crescent moon mocking him.

“Kurama gave you a hitai-ate.” Kakashi crouches down next to him.

Izuna curls his hand into a fist, then he reaches to his belt and pulls the head band from where he’d draped it over his katana. “Hn.” He hands it to Kakashi, who takes it as if it were something more precious. He always does that, it seems. He handles Izuna’s things with some strange level of respect that Izuna surely did not deserve. *His* Kakashi wouldn’t think twice. Then again, His Kakashi saw Sasuke as nothing more than a twelve year old depressed little brat….because that’s exactly what he was.

Regardless, Kakashi runs his fingers lightly over the swirl etched into the slight curve of the metal. He looks out over the dreary village. A cold mist clings to everything, the sky an overcast gray, one that matches the color of Kakashi’s eye, reflects a somber glow. What he could be thinking about, Izuna could only guess.

“The seal on your back…it connects you to him,” Kakashi whispers to him, quiet enough that if Itachi and Jiraiya weren’t the shinobi they were, no one but Izuna and the wind would’ve heard it. “It’s a flying thunder god seal, right?” he scoffs to himself, “it took me way too long to figure that out. And all those times you…I thought you had an old wound on your shoulder, but it was just Kurama, wasn’t it?”

Izuna stares out to the same melancholic sky. *An old wound…* “There’s a lot you still don’t know about us.”

“Then tell me.”

Izuna holds his hand out and the hitai-ate is deposited with some reluctance. Then he looks at Kakashi, really looks at him. He studies the slant of his own hitai-ate over his eye, and what exactly lies beneath it, what secrets Kakashi thinks he has, what he’s lost. Izuna might already know these things about Kakashi’s past, but Kakashi doesn’t know that. “Maybe I will,” Izuna considers it, weighing the metal in his hands as he weighs the consequences of his truth. “But let me ask you this, Kakashi…if I asked you about your past, would you be willing to tell me?”

And Kakashi is predictable. He stays as silent as the grave. The only indication that he heard Izuna is the slight waver in his eye. He doesn’t say anything, Izuna doesn’t fill the silence. They sit there in their own desolations, willing the other to crack. Neither will. They’re simply two immovable objects without an unstoppable force.

Eventually, Itachi interrupts their brooding with a sharp whistle. He signals for them to move southwest where, apparently, Shisui and the rest of the Anbu are headed as well to meet up on the edge of the village. Kakashi is all too eager to leave the awkward space they’ve created, and leaps up before Izuna gets the chance to turn his head.

But before he himself can run away, Jiraiya puts a hand up to stop Izuna’s descent from the rooftop. He watches Itachi and Kakashi’s retreating shadows get smaller and smaller. A flare of irritation sears his nerves, but he tempers it into a glare. He’s got a feeling he’s about to have an unpleasant conversation, and there’s a number of ways he could potentially get out of this. But almost all of them involve starting a fight, and then he’ll *firmly* be placed in

Konoha's bad graces once and for all. And despite it all, Izuna is trying not to do that this time.

"There's some things I need to ask about before we reach Konoha."

Izuna stands a bit straighter. "There's a lot of stray eyes and ears where we are. Information is bound to slip out. Is that what you want?"

"Information is bound to slip out regardless of time and place. That's the nature of a secret; that it's eventually shared." Jiraiya chuckles, then he takes a step back, allowing Izuna to move forward again, "These people have seen you twice already. Stories of a red-eyed, lightning-wielding *yokai* have no doubt reached half the continent by now."

It's safe to assume I'm no longer off the Akatsuki's radar… With a sudden surge of paranoia, he checks all his angles and blind spots. Even up on the roof, away from most of the prying eyes, he still sees at least four people looking at him and pointing. "It's not those rumors you wish to speak to me about, is it?"

"No."

Izuna clicks his tongue. He can't shake the sense that he's being watched. "I'm dreading this conversation either way."

Jiraiya doesn't answer him, merily laughs with too much cheer as they catch up to the others. "Let's chat when we break for the night."

They find themselves on the very outskirts of the village within a small smattering of houses. The grass around them crunches under their feet as they leave the concrete paths. Izuna's cloak whips around him as the wind picks up. The air smells like a promise of frost, and all the colors have dulled out into nothing but blotches of pale yellows and deep browns. Autumn has dug its claws deep.

Among the line of scarce trees, Izuna spots the anbu in the form of pale porcelain faces peering out from between tangles of branches and piles of dead leaves. Itachi joins them in a hurry, assimilating into the shadows with nothing more than a flick of a few signs to warn Shisui of their approach. Izuna still catches the ripple of shock that runs through them, something that even the most well-trained shinobi have trouble concealing.

Before the leaves have settled around his ankles, Shisui is on his feet and marching up towards him. Even with his mask, Izuna easily reads the tension in his muscles. He can't tell if it's anger, excitement, or something in between.

"You!" An accusatory finger is pointed at him without care. Izuna can't help but to relax a little at his lack of caution. "Do you know how many problems your bastard fox caused?"

Izuna settles back on his heels and looks down on Shisui. Instead of answering him, Izuna finds himself observing him. The eyes behind his mask are disbelieving. He looks way too young, way too small with too large eyes to be wearing that cat mask freshly marred by Kurama's claws. Everything he's known of *his* Shisui—the Shisui that actually *died* around

this time—slowly starts to dissolve into nothing. Because seven year old Sasuke saw Shisui as a hero, saw him almost in the same regards as Itachi, and unlike Itachi, Shisui's image of perfection was never sullied by death and betrayal and heartache. Now though, all his thoughts of cool and collected Shisui dissipate like the mist in the sun. He sees another teenage brat, just like him, only shorter.

His silence seems to unnerve Shisui enough for him to back away slowly, gathering up Itachi as he goes, and the two pull each other into a silent bickering war that dredges up another, distance memory that's more like an impression of something far off and ancient in the back of Izuna's mind. He watches them, marvels at them. He remembers them. He remembers clinging to Shisui's back while the two shoulder checked each other, Shisui pulling Itachi's ponytail like he does now, Itachi jabbing Shisui in the ribs when he's not looking, them fighting over the better use of the shuriken, training in the forest, Shisui's loud laughter—something that's missing from their current exchange, something that Izuna has forgotten the sound of.

He blinks and realizes that everyone is moving around him, that things are happening and he's been absent minded in this crucial moment. Jiraiya introduces him to the rest of the anbu; they promptly pretend to ignore him, though Izuna is instantly aware of their presence ten-fold.

The prickling on the back of his neck never seems to leave him.

Not as the anbu move about, preparing for their departure. Not when they actually start to move and the cold wind bites into his skin again. Not when Kakashi idly comments on how strange it is for them to be so close to Konoha, and yet it still feels so far.

And perhaps that's it. Izuna latches onto those words and agrees in his head. That must be it. That inevitability on the edge of the horizon. Staring at him.

"Shisui can be a lot," Kakashi says as they leap from tree to tree. Izuna looks back, because Shisui *is* a lot. Shisui refuses to take his eyes off Izuna for a second, and mumbles all too loudly about how insane they all are for allowing Izuna to come with them. Beneath it all, Izuna senses his burning curiosity. "Itachi's doing his best to keep him from yapping your ears off. I bet that once we stop for the day, he'll come right up to you with a whole slew of questions ready."

Izuna scoffs. He doesn't doubt it. "Maybe he'll be the one who realizes that asking questions will get him nowhere."

Kakashi shrugs. "We can only ask," he says, shooting Izuna's words right back at him. Izuna scowls, Kakashi grins. "Maybe he won't ask about your past. He's related to you, maybe he'll ask about your jutsu instead."

"Maybe he'll pester me about my foxes."

"Maybe he'll ask about your sharingan."

Izuna scoffs. "This just sounds like *you* want to know more about it."

“Well, I’m not denying that. I want to know you. Is that so bad?” Kakashi says it innocently, it rings like a bell in Izuna’s head, echoing down through his entire body. It sounds like a confession, said as casually as any other he’s received. It’s just the normal bullshit. It’s strange coming from Kakashi’s mouth.

Izuna promptly shuts his own. How is he supposed to say anything about *that,* anyway? Because, *yes…yes it is bad. Yes because it’ll get him killed. Yes because it’ll put me and Kurama in more danger than what it’s worth. Yes because…* Because Izuna can’t share himself, was never able to in the first place, and when he did it was only ever Naruto. He’s always been clinging onto cobwebs and the dead spiders that made them.

“And what you said earlier,” Kakashi keeps going as if he hadn’t said anything at all, but this time, it sounds rushed, on the edge of nervous if Izuna is reading him correctly. “I’ve been thinking that I should stop assuming that you don’t know things, and rather assume that you *do.* So…I’m…” Kakashi starts biting his words off like they’re hard to get out, “I’m going to assume that you already know-” he gestures to his left eye, scoffs to himself like his own thoughts are ridiculous. Izuna feels it like dread, like the ceaseless prickle down his spine he’s been feeling since he left Uzushio. “-how I got this.”

Now.

Izuna could lie.

He should lie.

He stares at Kakashi.

And silence fills his answer.

And perhaps the worst part is the way Kakashi’s one eye goes through the five stages of grief within ten seconds. He didn’t believe his own words when he said them, but Izuna’s heavy silence only confirms it. Denial sits on the tip of his tongue. When he swallows it’s full of regret, that he can’t be a better liar, just to save the fragile truce between them. But more than that, he doesn’t *want* to lie. He lies to protect himself, and somehow he can’t extend the same to anyone else. He knows it’s going to sting before he speaks, but he speaks regardless.

“Knowing isn’t the same as telling me.”

It’s Kakashi’s turn to stay silent. Then, quietly, “Izuna isn’t your real name, is it?”

He doesn’t answer.

“If you don’t say anything, I’m going to have to come up with my own conclusions.”

“Hn.”

“Are you-”

“No.” He shuts it down, a lot quicker than he thought he could. But Obito’s name will name not be spoken into existence, and not directed at *him,* no less. Obito is a curse. Obito brought

about the end of the world through the likes of Madara. Obito doesn't *exist* right now, as far as everyone else is concerned, and Izuna wants to *keep it that way.* For as long as possible, he doesn't even want to *think* about how he's going to deal with Obito.

Naruto was the one who got him to see clearly, when it was too late. *Naruto* changed his mind. When it was too late. Naruto's biggest regret was getting to Obito too late to stop everything. happening. Izuna wouldn't even know where to begin with Obito. And Kakashi…Kakashi wasn't any better. Kakashi tried to kill Obito the second he figured out who he was.

So no, Izuna will give Kakashi this; will allow him to cease those thoughts the moment they come. Because Izuna is *not* Obito.

Kakashi kind of runs away from him after that. He says something vague about checking their flank to make sure they're not being followed—they are, Izuna is almost sure of it—and disappears into the branches to his left.

Izuna lets out a deep sigh.

* * *

Night rolls around all too quickly. They're a slight hesitation around dusk, whether they should continue through the night, or break out a camp. Jiraiya out ranks everyone and makes them stop because of course he would. He makes a big show of acting like an old man in need of rest, then immediately delegating all the work to the anbu and Kakashi while he pitches his own tent and hermits inside without regard to anyone else.

Izuna tells the anbu that he should do the barriers, because he's the best of them. They deny him. The one with an Owl for a face straight up tells him that they don't trust him. Shisui then shoves him over to the fire pit Itachi is constructing and tells him "to sit there and look pretty."

A scorch mark is added to the wounds on Shisui's mask.

Itachi at least has nothing snarky to say to him as he lights the fire himself and kneels next to the flames to poke at it. When Itachi doesn't leave him to help Shisui with their tent, Izuna looks up at him over the crackling wood. "Is this how you felt in Uzushio? Powerless?"

"I don't think you're feeling very powerless. You're smiling."

"And you never seem to do so." Izuna lowers his eyes to the embers. Kurama pops into his head, another frowning face in the flames. He thinks about Kurama's chakra, still waning and waxing under his skin, barely there and burning through him quicker than before.

"And you're…talking."

"Silence is digging me further and further into an early grave, it seems."

Itachi tilts his head, then slowly, carefully crouches down next to him. In the distance, Shisui yells at Itachi to help him. He is ignored. Itachi doesn't speak. He allows Izuna all the time he

needs to fill it with his own words.

By the time he *does* manage to find something to say, there are three tents pitched, and the moon is starting to gleam, bright and silver, and the shadows are long and dark.

“Kurama will be the Uzukage,” Izuna says into the fire.

Itachi doesn’t startle, per-say, but he shifts his weight, enough of an indication that he’s caught off guard. “Did you convince him before we left?”

“No,” Izuna takes a charred stick and draws a couple lines in the dirt, “He knew all along what he had to do, he was just being stubborn about it.”

“I thought so,” Itachi takes his own charcoal stick and scratches along a flat stone. He draws the Konoha leaf. “It will be interesting to see what comes of it.”

“I think he’s gonna hate it,” Izuna says, “but it’s his fault…he took those kids saying he’d give them a better life. That’s what a kage is supposed to do, isn’t it?” Izuna draws an Uzumaki spiral next to Itachi’s leaf. *That’s why Naruto dreamed of it, isn’t it?*

Itachi stares at the marks, “What do you plan to do when you get to Konoha?”

“That depends,” Izuna looks up, watches as Shisui comes wandering over to them. He sits on the other side of Itachi, then he leans forward to look at Izuna. “-on what the Hokage thinks of me. And what the clan plans to do.”

“And what if…what they want is different?” Shisui asks, “whose side will you pick?”

Pick a side? Uchiha or Konoha? Izuna’s eyebrows furrow. *I didn’t kill Danzo for this…* but he guesses the death of one rotten root wouldn’t save the whole tree. The seeds of distrust ran far too deep. And…maybe he accidentally put a new wedge between them. His mere existence was kept a secret, apparently. He doesn’t even know if the clan has gotten news of him yet.

“Whose side would *you* pick?” Izuna turns away from their curious eyes and draws another spiral. He starts to draw for real, marking up the dirt as he recalls features of a face he knows better than his own.

“We’re loyal to Konoha first,” Shisui mutters, “But this is totally different! Because we’ve lived in Konoha all our lives, but you…you’re only connection to us is our blood. Would that make you more loyal to the clan than to Konoha, if it came down to it?”

“What makes you think I’m loyal to blood?”

“Because you’re here? The only reason you have ties to Konoha at all is because you’re an Uchiha. The only reason Kakashi was sent to scout you is because you’re an Uchiha. The only reason you’re entertaining us this long is because *we* are Uchiha, do you deny that?”

Izuna realizes that he’s making a portrait of *his* Naruto and quickly ruins it. He turns to them. “I don’t deny that.” Shisui’s mask is tilted sideways off his face. There’s a scrape on his

cheek that's half healed. It's from Karasu's claws, he can tell.

"Then…?" Shisui gestures for him to keep going.

Izuna decides to indulge him for a second. "Then… if the clan and Konoha want different things from me, it would depend on if what they want aligns with what I think is best."

Both of them narrow their eyes at him in unison. Izuna bites back a smirk. "That's presumptuous of you to assume you know what's best, rather than an entire body of people," Itachi says.

"Hn," Izuna adds the Uchiha fan next to the two symbols on the rock. "I'm not assuming I *know* what's best, just what I *think* is best."

"But you tend to *know* a lot of things too," Itachi mutters. Izuna raises an eyebrow, is Itachi mocking him? That's unexpected. "You know things you shouldn't."

"Everyone knows things they probably shouldn't," He deflects easily. He doesn't want to be pinned down and examined again, he already got that with Kakashi, who is not so subtly *lurking.* He sighs. "Yes, I know things. I'm trying to use what I know to come up with better solutions."

"Then why don't you tell the rest of us, so that *we* can make better solutions too?"

Izuna scoffs. They don't get it, they really don't. If Izuna were purely self sacrificing, if he truly were a hero like Naruto, he'd tell them. He'd warn them, he'd throw his own self away to ensure that the future is clear and bright. But he's not those things. He's selfish and wanting and desperate for his second chance at life. Even if he doesn't want to live, he won't give up living.

If he were truly selfless, then everyone would know his name by now and he'd be able to live with the consequences. The thought of Kakashi figuring out who he is is perhaps the worst thought imaginable. Because he doesn't know what the hell is happening between them, but it's sure to be ruined the second he learns the truth. Izuna dreads the day. That other inevitability.

So he sighs. He can't explain it, merely lifts a shoulder and the guilt gnaws at him when Shisui rolls his eyes, the distrust so clearly written all over his face. "I feel we're at a disadvantage here," Shisui mumbles.

"Are you?" Izuna puts too much pressure on the charcoal stick, and it snaps in two. One end flies up and Itachi catches it with his bare hand. "I'm only one man. You're an entire village." It sounds more accusatory than he wants. Shisui opens his mouth, then closes it. He stares at them boldly, no fear of their eyes. "All I have is me knowing more about you than you know about me."

He stares at them, they stare at him. Too young to be fighting. Too young to think about clans and villages and loyalty. Too young to think of betrayal, *of choosing sides.* Too young to be caught up so swiftly in the politics of an impending civil war.

Were they always so young?

Izuna scoffs, more to himself than anything, he rubs the crescent moon on his palm. And here he is, trying to save the world. Maybe he's too young for such a burden. But there's no one else. And perhaps that's the same with Itachi and Shisui. There's no one else to take their place. There's no one else with their skills, with their cunning, with their hearts.

If anyone were to betray the clan it would have to be Itachi, wouldn't it?

Izuna hopes, desperately, that one death is all it will take to keep that from happening. "What would it take for you to trust me?"

They only blink at him, faces open and confused disbelief written all over. The fire in front of them crackles loudly. Plumes of smoke waft between them, filling Izuna's lungs with it. Around them, there is the constant pressure of eyes. Far off anbu watching them, Kakashi shifting in the trees, Jiraiya's unseen presence, and farther still, Izuna feels it like fire.

"Tell us about your eyes," Shisui says on a rushed exhale. His own black eye gleam, the hidden crimson reflecting flames.

Izuna leans back, his mouth draws into a line. All of them understand the gravity of his request. Even Kakashi ceases his endless shuffling and stills completely. The entire encampment holds its breath, waiting for Izuna's reply.

And it weighs on the tip of his tongue. He scrambles for words to string together, the swell of grief in the back of his throat pushing them forward as he recalls the first time his sharingan spun to life. He pointedly avoids catching Itachi's eye, but he still feels the heavy burden of his brother's stare drilling into the side of his head. His body tells him to flee, to run away.

And maybe it's the last flickers of Kurama's chakra that he clings to that roots him to the spot, that takes the words building in his lungs finally spill out. Izuna is a terrible liar, after all.

He opens his mouth to speak. He can't.

Because he feels it again, that prickle under his skin.

Familiar in all the wrong ways.

And over the fire and billowing smoke he sees it then, just as a white mask comes tumbling down, covered in a sheen of crimson.

A spiral staring at him from between trees and shadows.

And just like that nothing else matters. Izuna stands, and vaguely around him he's aware of Itachi and Shisui leaping to their feet, of Kakashi flickering behind him, setting up a quick formation as the remaining two other anbu get as far from that spiraled face as possible.

But Izuna stands on stiff legs. Every cell in his body is humming with a thousand different things, all of them like lightning building throughout his limbs. And yet he remains frozen,

stuck to his spot as if he were only twelve years old and stuck in the forest of death.

And only then has he ever felt the fear of death and never again. Until this moment, staring the end of the world in the eye, and thinking only of how to run away.

But he finds his voice, finally. Because Kurama's chakra is still there and it flares up inside him, chasing away the frost, replacing it with it's fire. And he feels, not just the fear, but the *anger* of a burned world behind his eyes.

"Well," He spits. But he's so acutely aware of the people standing by his side. *Kakashi is right there.* And he doesn't need this right now. So he bites back the name that sits there like a brand in his mind. And he grins instead, thinking of the irony of it all. "-If it isn't *Madara."*

Chapter End Notes

Okay so y'all have NO IDEA how difficult this chapter has been to write. Like, there's SO MANY things to explore right after that BEEFY chapt. abt saying goodbye to Uzushio and Kurama and etc etc. And I reaaaallly wanted another Izuna/Sasuke chapter right after it even through my HEART was telling me to write kakashi's POV but like I KNEW that for story purposes it HAD to be Sasuke okay? So that really put me down...and also? Like where Sasuke is at character development-wise? yeah, that's uncharted territory for me, okay? Like, idk if you can tell, but I've been self projecting my own experience with grief and loss and fear of abandonment and feeling unloved and projecting trauma etc etc and I...have not gotten over it. I don't know what comes next--what does it feel like to accept death? What does it feel like to know that there's a place called home? What does it feel like to figure out how to say goodbye properly, to know that you're loved? I don't know.

And then like I said, school is kickin my ASSS and I'm starting to come to terms with the rest of my life lmao existential crisis alert, that my roommate was making worse bc she constantly would ask me abt my future and tell me that I need to do things, and she does it with good intensions but oh boy the pure panic it gives me...and like I'm one of those people who acts angry to cover up my anxiety and then cry myself to sleep so haha it was bad for a while, so that on top of the sheer amount of art and writer's block I've been experiencing since the beginning of the year...fuck...So I'm getting this out there even though I don't think it's that great--definitely not as good as the banger of the last chapter. BUT-I'll keep going even if it's shit!!

Redemption Lies Plainly In Truth

Chapter Notes

WOOT, Totally procrastinating ehehe. I like this, shit's HAPPENINGNGNNGG

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Anger. Pure fire runs through Izuna's veins. He sees the forests set ablaze. The sky choked with black clouds. The dead bodies of his friends strewn across the puttmarked terrain. Butchered, slaughtered, murdered. Konoha reduced to nothing but rubble, no ruins left standing, only craters where the village should have been. All across the world he heard the wails of lost souls crying out for their savior.

For Naruto.

Who burned along with that world.

And what's left standing of that far off place? That ruinous memory scattered across his consciousness like ashes? Only him. *Only Sasuke.* Stolen away from time and space by Naruto's love and sacrifice.

He sees Naruto too.

Burning.

And who was it that shifted those gears, turned the clock round and round, set the pieces, but this figure of malice and vile before him? Standing there like the universe caters to his every whim. Who names himself *Madara* with the same lackluster care Sasuke names himself *Izuna.*

What is he to do but let his blood boil, let his vision speckle red, let crimson wash over his eyes. And under the surface of his skin Kurama's chakra spikes and roars and hisses, spits with the same rage that tastes like acrid fire in the back of his throat. He welcomes it this time, instead of spitting it out. He knows it's not directed at him, but rather he's the fuel for this fire, the fan for the flame.

Obito peers down at them all. His movements come in languid motions, cat-like in the way he tilts his head forward while the rest of him remain poised and still, yet he looks too relaxed, perched in the branches above them.

Izuna's vision narrows in at the slight movement of his finger tapping the chin of his mask. He hums a tone low in his throat. "Most shinobi would hesitate to say my name," Obito says, calm and almost too quiet for Izuna to hear over the howl of autumn wind.

“Yeah,” Izuna’s hands betray him as they start to shake. He clenches them into fists in the confines of his cloak. *“Most.”*

Obito’s mask is different from what he knows. He doesn’t wear the iconic red clouds, but a large, sleeved cloak, his silhouette nearly lost in the shadows. His hair is longer, a spiky mess that resembles the man he takes the name of. His voice is low and his posture too proud for the character of Tobi. He stands like a phantom and speaks like some otherworldly thing. And people called Izuna the *yokai,* when there’s another monster in the flesh.

And just when this night couldn’t get any worse, Jiraiya decides that now is the best time to *finally* show himself. Maybe he’s drawn to the sudden spike of hostile chakra that practically bathes their encampment, or Kurama’s kyuubi chakra reacting, or perhaps it’s just the silence that draws him from his tent. Izuna doesn’t care.

Obito’s head only shifts the slightest fraction as Jiraiya emerges. He stands to his full height and the two regard one another in complete and all encompassing silence. “And to what do we owe the pleasure of Madara’s company?” Jiraiya smiles his fake smile, his words sickly sweet, a threat not so subtly put.

There’s a hand pressing suddenly to the edge of Izuna’s shoulder. Itachi’s chakra swarms him before he can freak out. “I’ve seen this guy before. He killed my teammates,” Itachi mutters. Izuna nods his head slightly, but he doesn’t speak. He can’t take his eyes from Obito for even a millisecond.

“There’s been a recent thorn in my side,” Obito drawls, “someone’s been going around killing my comrades.”

Comrades. As if Obito weren’t the one pulling the strings, using the Akatsuki as his pawns, and being used himself.

Jiraiya hums, casting a side eye in Izuna’s direction. “Your comrades wouldn’t happen to belong to a certain organization, would they?”

Obito settles down on the branch, his feet swinging freely. He rests an elbow on his knee, his face in his hand. “Perhaps…I’m not here to speak to *you,* nothing but Konoha’s bitch.”

He points to Izuna, “What’s your name, *thorn?”* Obito singles him out, shoves the spotlight onto him.

And Izuna *takes* it. He lifts his head to meet that sharingan, to watch Obito’s eye when he utters his new, wretched name.
“Izuna Uchiha.”

Obito blinks. “Liar.”

And here, Izuna has to laugh. “That makes two of us.”

“You don’t deny it?”

“You’re not either.”

There's a horrible pause. One where Izuna can feel the weight of all the Konoha shinobi staring at his back. All except for Kakashi, because he already figured it out. Izuna doesn't let it bother him. Not right now, anyway. He's a liar. That much is the truth at least.

Obito also seems to find this amusing, the irony clearly not lost on him either. "What a coincidence. Then should I call you *brother?"*

"I wouldn't act so familiar if I were you," Izuna hisses, "you're outnumbered." Not that it really matters when it comes to Obito. But more importantly, if they all come together they outclass Obito. What he doesn't understand is that Obito must've known all of this. He knows that four of them possess sharingan, and that Jiraiya is not to be underestimated, and yet he still stands there.

It dawns on Izuna; the two possibilities. "Don't think your aloe-vera friend can even this playing field either." If Obito is surprised by Izuna's knowledge, he hides it. "But you're not here to fight us, are you?"

"Hmm…It seems you're a bigger nuisance than I thought." Obito lifts his chin ever so slightly, "I've been following you for a while now."

"Tell me something I don't know." Izuna digs his nails into his palms to keep himself steady. He wants nothing more than to launch himself forward. He wants to rip Obito's eyes out with his own hands. But he can't. As they stand, Izuna is like a barrier between Obito and the rest of the group. Kakashi and Itachi are to his left and right, a step behind. If he were to lash out right now, Obito would either take the opportunity to attack them, or Zetsu would.

And…and he still doesn't know what to do about Obito in the first place. The chakra within him—Kurama, really—urges him to kill him. He, himself, would like nothing more. Another one off his list. Another name he could care less about.

Naruto would be so disappointed in him, knowing that Obito could be saved and Izuna chooses not to. And Kakashi…He'd understand, wouldn't he? Or is this another unnecessary death? Does Obito have to die if he has the capacity to change?

"You're right though." Obito shrugs, his hands open and facing out as if to show him he's not hiding weapons. It does nothing to ease Izuna's nerves. "I'm not here to fight you, *Izuna,"* he shrugs again, "You've caught my eye. It's not often two of our members are felled so easily."

"You were looking to recruit me, weren't you?" So *typical* of him, really. "Of course…" he rolls his eyes, "but I'm not alive so I can be swayed so easily. What's in it for me?" There is an audible gasp to his side. Shisui slaps a hand over his own mouth when Izuna glares at him from the corner of his eye.

"You're no serious-" Kakashi hisses from his right, earning him a glare as well. His hitai-ate is raised, mismatched eyes shining dully in moonlight. Izuna turns away from him.

"You're a bounty hunter, aren't you? What is it you're chasing? Money? Prestige?" Obito laces his fingers together and tilts his head again, indicating to Izuna when he doesn't answer. "And from my perspective, you owe the Akatsuki."

“Owe?” Izuna scoffs, “What the hell could I owe you?”

Obito lets out a short, cruel laugh. It’s ice cold and shoots its way through Izuna’s veins, staving the fire, causing him to shiver. “You’re life—seeing as you took two from us.”

Underneath his cloak, Izuna grips the hilt of his katana, then switches to his tanto. What should he do, attack or continue to drag this on? He contemplates Obitio’s words, feigning curiosity. “Y’know…there *is* something I’ve been chasing.”

“Name it, our leader is…forgiving to those who show loyalty to us.”

“Leader?” Izuna stares at him incredulously. It all snaps in his head just then, hatred coming back with a vengeance, swerving his next words into a complete mess. Consequences be damned.

“I know it’s *you* who calls the shots.” And *oh* are the consequences worth it when he sees the way Obito finally breaks. The stutter of his movement, how his shoulders go stiff, the dark shadow over his mask grows deeper, his very aura spikes with anxious energy that’s not chakra, but just *him.*

Izuna grins, wicked and wild. He takes Obito’s fears and twists them, holding them like weapons when he opens his mouth and spills out his secrets. “I know you’re the real leader of the Akatsuki. I know you’re the one who attacked Konoha that night. I know your plan to awaken the ten tails. I know *everything* about you.”

Obito stands, his movements stiff with caution. “Careful what you say, *brother.”*

“Careful who you call *brother-”* Izuna all but snarls gleefully, his grin covering the own shake of adrenaline coursing through him. He readies himself for a sudden attack, and the whole world shifts with his subtle stance. Like everyone around him can feel it too, the thick tension in the air, the lightning sparkling off the black depths of his cloak, the way their fire pit roars and hisses and wanes. No one moves, but everyone is prepared for the inevitable.

A crash of false brothers. “-I have a habit of killing them.”

Obito leaps forward. Izuna rushes to meet him. Before they can clash, he throws his tanto. It flies through the air like a streak of silver, lightning glittering off it as it leaves his finger tips. Chirping birds follow, racing chidori up his arm and through his finger tips, burning a strange mix of hues as the last of Kurama’s chakra ripples with his own.

There’s only one way to win a fight against Obito, and it’s timing. The blade passes through the middle of his skull. They’re so close that Izuna can see his eye, can see the smug grin and scarred skin. But it all falters when Izuna doesn’t react in the slightest.

His rinnegan spins, drawing Obito’s attention, and that eye widens. A hand reaches for him, and the microseconds tick past, Izuna prays to whatever god will listen that he’s gotten this right, that the hilt of his tanto disappears out the back side of his head, and Izuna himself looks past Obito to it.

An instant is all it takes to change the fate of history.

In one blink of time and space, Obito's hand collapses around the blade of his tanto instead of Izuna.

And Izuna? He makes the mistake of thinking. Of looking elsewhere instead of facing what this deadly weapon can do. He sees Kakashi, his one eye spinning a pinwheel. And his lightning slides through flesh and bone, a crunch of ribs and punctured flesh. Obito retches violently, a waterfall of blood and gore spilling out from under his mask.

I missed.

The next second ticks. Izuna barely registers that his hand is punctured straight through Obito's body until vines erupt around them. Izuna rips himself away, sliding his arm out from it's encasing of destroyed bones and ruined muscle, leaping into the air just as Obito is swallowed by the earth. An arc of glistening blood splatters onto the ground where he'd been.

Gone. Just like that.

When his feet land again, he falls to his knees and screams, his vision assaulted by the images of his dead friends, of all the lives he's just let down.

"Come back you *fucking coward!"* He pounds the ground, his left hand covered in gore up to his elbow. Blood drips down in thick globs, slick and sickly dark in the flickering firelight, still warm. "Come back here and face me!"

Izuna's voice grows harsher, rough with his shouts, with his vindictive laughter that tears through him, broken and manic. He can see Naruto scolding him that he picked wrong again. His breath comes in ragged gasps as he looks at the mistake he's made, soaked into his skin, splattered across his face and hair and cloak. Everything. His fingers dig gauges into the dirt.

Naruto would never have done this. "The next time I see you…I swear…I'll-I'll…" He tries to grab onto something from within him, some piece of stability, that flicker of Kurama. But there is none. He's left shivering with the cold of a sharp wind against his back. When he breathes it's an icy sting in his lungs. He's exposed, a live wire, a ticking time bomb with a thousand eyes boring into his skin.

Before he can catch his breath, he's being yanked up to his feet unceremoniously from under his arms by the two Anbu he doesn't know. Izuna is hauled into Jiraiya's tent with little fanfare and dumped in a heap on the floor. The tent flap zips up behind him a second later.

Faintly, in the back of his own fuzzy mind, he can hear a half assed argument just outside the tent. Jiraiya, trying to placate as he always tries to do, and almost always unsuccessfully.

"-Stay out of this, Kakashi," Jiraiya mutters, sounding too serious for his usual persona.

Kakashi ignores him. "Let me talk to him—he's more willing to talk if it's me, *please-"*

“I’m putting you and the Uchiha’s on guard duty. Check the perimeter and make sure that guy is *gone.”*

“But-”

“Kakashi, I will report you to the hokage that your mission is a failure on the account that you’re too emotionally invested to think rationally about this if you don’t leave. Right. Now.”

“Wait—we also need to-” That was Shisui.

“Leave.”

There’s a weighted pause.

Seconds later, the tent flap unzips, Jiraiya steps in, and shuts it again. He turns to glare down at Izuna, who doesn’t move at all. By now, his breathing has evened out into something slow and quiet, almost too quiet. There’s a ringing in his head, his eyes keep darting around the floor, thinking of all the possible outcomes to come from this failure. And most importantly —he needs to get word to Kurama *now.*

Jiraiya shuffles around Izuna, lighting up a few lanterns before he settles down across from him. He sighs, heavy and showing his true exhaustion for a second before his eyes harden up and he frowns deeply at him.

“They can’t hear us in here.” Jiraiya gestures to the patterns drawn directly onto the canvas. “Seals…you probably know all about them, eh?”

Izuan doesn’t bother lifting his head to check them.

“So…where do we start?” He chuckles humorously.

Izuna thinks about Naruto, about all the stories he’d tell about his mentor. Not all of it was great, most of it no good, unsavory expeditions to spy on or even harass women. Rare was it that Jiraiay would teach him something useful. Rarer still would he extend some of his great sage wisdom. Despite all of Jiraiya’s shortcomings, Naruto called him something like ‘father.’ Izuna has to wonder if it's because Naruto never knew what a father really was. He should sully the memory of Naruto’s memories though.

Where should Izuna start indeed.

“That man claimed to be a member of the Akatsuki, yet you say *he’s* their leader?”

A puppet leader, dropped down into hell and grasping the single string that could pull him up, lets himself be led by it, even if all there is at the end of that thread is a hungry spider. Izuna laughs to himself at his own stupid analogy.

“You called him Madara knowing that it’s an alias. And your name is also one too, correct?”

Obito could never stand up to the *real* Madara. The real Madara could send a shiver through his spine from a mile away with his bloodlust alone. Izuna's side cramps at just the thought. His shoulders shake involuntarily.

"You also claim that he's the one that caused the kyuubi to attack seven years ago. And he's planning to…release the ten tails? Isn't that a myth? How do you know all this information?"

How can he *not* know it, when he sees its aftermath playing out in his nightmares? It *is* a myth, a trick, a ploy. Obito is being played. Madara is *also* being played. The second Madara figured it out the first time he rung Zetsu's neck til he head popped clean off his shoulders. Then he killed everyone in his rage.

"Did you kill your brother?"

Izuna's shoulders stop shaking. When he finally lifts his head, Jiraiya's eyes are as hard as steel, but there's also an aloofness to him when he catches Izuna off guard.

"Ah…finally feeling the consequences of your loose tongue are we? People tend to spew things in the heat of a battle. But you've really outdone yourself with that one-liner. What was it? 'Be careful who you call brother, I have a habit of killing them?'"

His mouth feels like cotton. What could he even say to get himself out of this? Should he attempt such a thing, or just let the walls come tumbling down? Accept his fate, or fight it once more? Should he lie?

Izuna sits up and shifts so his legs are also crossed in front of him, mirroring Jiriaya's posture. He's acutely aware of the sticky dampness coating his left arm, blood still seeping into his clothes, staining the colorful shifting colors in his cloak, making his limbs and soul feel heavy.

"Ready to talk now?"

Izuna nods his head minutely.

"Then talk."

Izuna sighs heavily, resigned to his fate at last. He's been running from this, hasn't he? The hardest part is turning to face it, whatever this is he's running from. Once he starts to race towards it, everything will be easier. A jump starts then, head first.

"Do you consider yourself a dreamer, Jiraiya?"

Jiraiya blinks, his brows furrow. "What do you mean by that?"

Izuna exhales shakily. "You, Itachi, Kakashi….you're all smart. Itachi and Kakashi are called geniuses for a reason. They're smart in the way of pragmatism. They don't *believe* in things… but, I'm sure you've figured out a lot by now. Like Kurama. You know what he is, don't you?"

Jiraiya doesn't hesitate. "He's the kyuubi no kitsune…though…I have no idea how-"

"-Yes…I-I think you do, actually."

Now he pauses, Jiriaya's eyes squint at him, searching Izuna's own for any despection. His sharingan has been off this entire time, Rinnegan dulled and hidden safely behind his hair. "What I'm thinking…should be impossible."

Izuna smirks even as his heart thunders in his chest. "Is anything truly impossible?"

"It would be so much easier if you just…told me."

"Where's the fun in that?"

Jiraiya's frown turns angry. "Is this a game to you? Do you like watching us flounder around you—string us along to whatever whim strikes your fancy?"

It's Izuna's turn to glower. "Who cares if I do? I'm a fucking coward, that's all. Besides, I've given you enough to figure it all out. So tell me, Jiraiya, where do I come from? Where do Kurama and I come from? Who are we? What are we doing here?"

Jiraiya's eyes are like a wall, Izuna can't tell what he's thinking as they glare at each other. Izuna grips his blood covered arm under his cloak to keep his hand from shaking continuously. His hand feels cold in the exposed air, his fingers locking up like a claw. He can still feel the way Obito's lung collapsed around it, the scrape of broken ribs against his skin, the pulse of still twitching muscles. He'd missed Obito's heart. There's no way he'd die from Izuna's chidori.

"Kurama's existence explains this more than anything you are. But…you're from the future, aren't you?"

Izuna knew it. He knew that Jiraiya was the one to figure it out, but just speaking it out into the air is like a bucket of ice down Izuna's spine. He still stiffens as if he's been slapped, blood roaring in his ears, fight or flight activated and all he wants to do is run. He grinds his teeth together and digs his nails into the flesh of his arm to keep himself still.

"And Kurama Uzumaki…He's not a jinchuuriki but *really* the kyuubi…but his vessel…that's still Naruto, isn't it?"

Tears well up in the back of Izuna's eyes. They threaten to fall, but he refuses them, sends a shock of lightning through his fingernails, the pain only mildly distracting. He sucks in a lungful of stale air and exhales just as slowly.

"He meant alot to you, didn't he…" Jiraiya studies him closely. His eyes roving over him, and then down to the palm of his hand, his faded moon seal still there like it will be until the day he dies. There's a slow realization that takes over his features. "What Kurama said at the bonfire…He told Naruto to find his moon."

Izuna bites his tongue.

“That’s you, isn’t it?” Izuna laughs bitterly, the only confirmation Jiraiya really needs. He can’t imagine what kind of wreck he looks right about now, still covered in Obito’s blood that’s finally starting to dry and cake around his arm, the hunch of his shoulders, his disheveled hair, his eyes that feel too wet and too dry at the same time.

“That’s me…Naruto’s soulmate.” He grins, sniffs, it falters, he grimaces, bites his tongue again, laughs. There’s too much going on all at once. But the words come out regardless if he wants them to. He’s past the point of no return. “Sasuke Uchiha.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok so unlike the last chapter I just PLOWED through this like hardly any of this was cut, just purely on a ROLL with this one, it's GOOD shit.

The chapter title is a lyric from the song "Achilles Come Down" by Gang of Youths which is a BANGER AND I HIGHLY RECOMMEND

IRL stuff:
I JUST had spring break and I've been procrastinating doing my 3D Modeling stuff for class until today (sunday) which requires me to log into a file server on a school computer through the internet (its cool shit) but anyway I log into like three different computers and guess what??? :DDD ALLL the computers :DDD Wouldn't let me :DDD into the fucking server :DDD so guess who has to roll up to my class with a 57% grade tomorrow with NO WAY of fixing it bc I can't access my files :DDDD I sent an email to my prof like at 8pm after 4 days of ghosting her so hopefully im not absolutely chewed tf out.

The Silver Lining

Chapter Summary

TW: mild self harm (??) Panic attack (ish??) Suicidal thoughts

Chapter Notes

Alway, Idk how I feel about this chapter. Things happen lol

So uh...I've been thinking about changing the rating to Mature because there's already a lot of violence and gore but also for *cough* no other particular reason *cough* 👀👀👀👀

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Heat waves roll, coils of smoke climbing higher and higher, crackling and hissing and spitting before him. A pile of scrolls, broken shelves, vast sums of knowledge and human records all sit before him within an impression in the ground. Dying. Fading. Burning. Flames roar and tower higher and higher as dusk settles into twilight. They glow as bright as daylight, but cause the edges of Sasuke's vision to crowd with just as tall shadows, infinitely dark, threatening to swallow him up.

Beside him, Naruto is as quiet as those shadows. Firelight casts him in orange and red. His eyes mirror embers. He's been oddly stoic through the whole ordeal, uncharacteristically hopeless as their inevitable cataclysm looms closer and closer. Naruto has been able to sense Madara's oppressive presence ever since he came knocking into the barriers. Those invisible walls are the only thing keeping them safe. But they're not stupid enough to believe that they'll hold forever.

Naruto finished his seal, hoping for the best. Sasuke swirled his sharingan and planned for the worst.

Necessary steps.

Precautions.

That's what Sasuke had called them when he knocked the support pillars down and collapsed the library in on itself. He told Naruto to gather up every single scroll on the island and add

it to the pile. He told him to find every seal and ruin them. Destroy it all, ruin the ruins until they're nothing but dust.

Naruto did not fight him on this. He held his tongue with a precision Sasuke is not used to seeing in him. He figures out that he hates the vacant expression that shifts across Naruto's face. He figures out he never wants to see it again.

Regardless of expressions, Sasuke set it all ablaze when Naruto couldn't bring himself to do it. "I'll carry this burden," Sasuke tells him, lets himself be the calm for Naruto to latch onto. Even then, when he steeled his nerves and breathed in the dusty air—filled with the smell of paint and concrete and old paper—he hesitates. The fire in his lungs gathers until it burns him too, and then he exhales.

And everything goes up in flames.

And they stand there, side by side at the end of the world, the only two pillars remaining. Sasuke didn't get a chance to memorize every scroll. Information buried in Uzushio, lost once and for all.

Not that it matters. Not really, when the rest of the world is already in flames.

So Sasuke watches Naruto, watches him as his ancestral home goes out the same way. Only it's by Sasuke's hands.

He turns back to the fire. A pyre of scrolls, crackling at him, crying out for someone to save them, to rescue all the history and knowledge and care and love poured into their contents. Sasuke can't help but feel he's burning the heart of the island itself. And yet, the storm around them still continues on, protects them, and doesn't send a drop of rain to quench the flames.

Without a word, Sasuke kneels slowly. The cracked concrete bites into his skin. His sudden action causes Naruto to stir from his own stupor. He looks down as Sasuke sits on his feet and brings his hands together. He listens to the wailing in the roars of the flames. He sees faces in the shimmering heat mirages. Under his breath he dredges up old words from the very corners of his mind.

"What are you doing?" Naruto asks, quiet and cool against the prickling heat on his face. The fire seems to wane from him as he leans forward to inspect Sasuke.

Sasuke doesn't look at him. He keeps his eyes forward. He stares into the fire and listens to it. Perhaps it's the gnawing guilt of survival that causes him to see things, but there are memories embedded into every seal of Uzushio. Imprints of chakra, of thought, of people. *And here he is. Killing them all.*

But these kinds of things, the 'after death' part, all of that is for the living. And he's doing this for Naruto more than anyone. "It's…an Uchiha funeral ritual," he lands on eventually, "to honor our dead." There's no dead here. But there is. The entire island is a graveyard, and they've yet to do anything but bring their ruin with them. "Since…I doubt Uzushio's people were given a funeral at all…when it fell."

Naruto kneels down next to him and copies his pose. "You don't have to explain yourself," He mutters, facing the fire, "Thank you," Sasuke doesn't know if he's truly saying it to him, or to something else.

And their silence continues on, filled only by the splitting of wood snapping, smoldering, the snaps and pops drowning out the sound of wildlife. Sasuke closes his eyes eventually and thinks about the first days they'd arrived, how lively Naruto had been, how he looked running through the overgrown forests. His laughter when he smacked Sasuke in the face with a glob of wet seaweed. His dancing through the sand, them kicking off their shoes to feel it in their toes. The way his face became somber and crestfallen when he finally saw the ruin of his birthright. A place he should've gotten to know under different circumstances.

And so many things had to go wrong in order for them to go right.

Sasuke is drawn back to the present day by a distraught flicker, a restlessness that Sasuke feels against his skin even though there's nothing touching him. He peels open his eyes to find Naruto crying silently, his nose scrunched up, his teeth sunk so far into his lip that Sasuke fears he'll start bleeding. His chest stutters and heaves, uneven rasps of barely contained breath, clearly trying to hold it all in, keep it all together.

When he catches Sasuke looking, he quickly turns away and buries his face into the crook of his elbow, rubbing furiously. "I'm sorry—I'm ruining this."

"No, you're not," Sasuke says. Seeing Nartuo so distraught starts to rip at him, but he keeps his voice as calm as possible.

Naruto takes a deep breath through his nose. He collects himself enough to spit out, almost venomously. "No—this is stupid, I'm crying over some scrolls, for fucks sake." He goes for a laugh, which serves to break their hearts even more. Only Naruto would laugh at a funeral.

"You and I both know it's not just about some scrolls." Naruto really loses it then, but Sasuke catches him before he falls. Naruto clings to him, hands gripping his back so tight that Sasuke can barely breath. He buries his face into the crook of Sasuke's neck and sobs. And Sasuke holds him, because this is all he can do.

"I know we have to—I know that letting Madara have any single bit of information here would be like a death sentence. But, Sasuke, it hurts. It hurts so much. Some of my family—people I've never met but they are—wrote those scrolls. They made these incredible things and they wanted them to be passed down the generations. To me." Naruto somehow manages to squeeze him tighter. Sasuke hums in affirmation and cards a hand through his hair, scratches at his scalp.

Naruto leans into his touch. "And we have to burn it all. We have to destroy this place again when it's already been through so much…after it sheltered us and kept us safe and gave us this incredible opportunity. Despite it all, it felt like fate. Whenever we discovered things, it always felt like this place was just waiting for us to find it…and…and it's just unfair."

Sasuke knows Naruto isn't just talking about them destroying Uzushio all over again. He's talking about it all. The unfairness of reality, the despair of the waking world that Madara

had sought to put to sleep. Sasuke doesn't blame him for going complete batshit when it all crumbled into nothing but a lie, Sasuke did the same. Not everyone has someone like Naruto to pull them back out. So Sasuke doesn't say anything else, just lets Naruto soak his shirt with hot tears, letting him squeeze the breath from his lungs.

"We're saying goodbye to this timeline, aren't we?" Naruto sniffles eventually.

"Yeah." The truth is…Madara is at their doorstep. Someone has to keep him there until the seal is finished.

Naruto pulls back just enough to look him in the eye. His lip curls ever so slightly in disdain, "We've already talked about this, we're going together." He reads Sasuke like an open scroll.

"I know." There's no winning against Naruto.

Naruto gives him another skeptical glare. Then he grumbles, "As long as you know…" before he pushes against Sasuke, and they settle more comfortably on the ground, curled around each other like cats in front of the pyre.

Naruto stares up to where the smoke bleeds into a night sky, one that's too dark and full of clouds to see the stars. So Naruto singles out the moon and frames it with his hands. While Naruto watches the sky, Sasuke stares at him, drinking in his profile, the moonlight in his eyes, slightly red from his crying, the fact that he can smile and it looks like hope and grief at the same time.

"What do you think it's like on the other side?" Naruto asks him.

Sasuke doesn't answer. He doesn't really care about the other side.

* * *

"Sasuke…Uchiha…" Jiraiya repeats his name slowly, mulling it over in his brain. The name shouldn't be too familiar to him, not yet. Sasuke Uchiha is still a tiny little speck of dust in the grand scheme of things. Sasuke Uchiha doesn't become someone to the rest of the world until he's the last Uchiha left. But though he's not famous yet, he's not unknown either. Jiraiya gets it, finally, after what feels like eternity between one breath and another.

His old eyes spark with recognition. "You're *Itachi's brother—"* he does a double take, "you…you *killed-"*

"Itachi?" Izuna cuts him off with a rattling breath. His lungs feel like glass, sharp and painful inhales, shaky exhales, one false move and he'll shatter into a million shards. "Yeah," He hisses bitterly, "things don't really *go as planned,* where I'm from…let's just say…he's not the good guy in my story."

“And…and so…but you’re…what *happened?”* Jiraiya’s voice barely leaves a shocked whisper. He studies Izuna differently this time, cataloging his powers, his eyes—rinnegan and dormant sharingan—katana with his bells, the evidence of chidori in the blood splattered up his arm. He’s pulling together Sasuke Uchiha’s future story through the bits and pieces he decorates himself with.

Izuna leans back onto his heels and sneers in contempt. *What happened indeed.* “Wouldn’t you like to know, old man.”

Jiraiya gapes at him. “Do-Do you *realize* the severity of your position right now, or are you that arrogant? Imagine if I walk out there and tell them who you are—that you’re a time traveler-” Jiraiya laughs, incredulous.

Izuna might be a sniffling, half delirious, tear streaked sight, but he’s not stupid. Reckless and chaotic? Yes. Not stupid. He sighs and lifts his head to meet Jiriaya’s questioning stare. Just the sight of his rinnegan is enough to have the man biting his own tongue. “Yeah,” He scoffs right back. “Imagine that.”

Jiraiya scowls and crosses his arms, intrigued and hating every second of it, no doubt. Izuna smirks despite it all, letting his bravado cascade into armor around him, trying desperately to cling to this facade he’s created for himself. It’s so useless, but it’s all he can do at this point. “I know you’re not so short sighted as to tell Konoha. Or anyone, for that matter. Tell me, what would happen if the shinobi world learned of time travel?”

Jiraiya sighs heavily, his eyes betraying his annoyance. “Chaos,” he answers, voice clipped, “Is it your rinnegan?”

Izuna’s brow furrows.

“Time travel. Does your rinnegan-”

He shakes his head. “This has nothing to do with that. It wasn’t even me that figured it out, it was…” He stops himself.

“Naruto.” Jiraiya shifts his weight to one side, contemplating something that Izuna doesn’t know. It’s clear that Jiraiya actually believes him, but Izuna’s not sure how to get Jiraiya to believe *in* him. He keeps his mouth shut, Until…

“Do you…are you trying to go back? Did the kyuubi do some-”

“We can’t go back,” Izuna cuts him off right there. His sneer only grows when he realizes the implications of Jiraiya’s budding accusation. He knew all this time who Kurama was, saw Kurama act the way he did, and his first instinct is to *blame Kurama?*

Izuna nearly wipes his memory clean right then and there. “There’s nothing to go back to.”

If Jiraiya’s eyes got any wider, he’d look exactly like those toads he totes around. Izuna amuses himself with that mental image, trying to prepare for the next question, the next onslaught of unwanted memories it’ll inevitably create.

"Nothing? Surely that can't-"

"Nothing." Izuna confirms. "It was all burnt down to the dirt. Destroyed. Ravaged. The end of the fucking world."

"That's why you're here. To try and stop…whatever it is."

Izuna grimaces. "That was the plan…I guess."

"You guess?" It's Jiraiya's turn to scoff in pure disbelief. "You *guess* you just time traveled to stop—what—an apocalypse? You're not 100% in your own conviction to stop the literal end of all things, you only guess?"

"Yeah," Izuna mumbles. "Wasn't really my thing."

Jiraiay takes a moment, then another—takes it all in. He chuckles in the back of his throat, both nervous and incredulous. "Naruto huh? He convinced you and you were just…along for the ride." Izuna scowls. Jiraiya hums. Both of them know that's the truth. "What happened to him, then?"

He looks away.

Jiraiya takes it as an admission of guilt. "Killed him like you're brother?"

Izuna has his tanto to Jiraiya's neck before either could blink. The accusation stings stronger than a slap. "What right do *you* have to accuse me of such things?" Izuna hisses between clenched teeth. Jiraiya doesn't move. His face remains deadly calm, assured. He doesn't believe Izuna will slit his throat. He's right.

Izuna doesn't remove the blade and continues. He needs an upper hand in this battle of words and now he has it. "I didn't kill him, but he died because of me. The least I can do is try to fix this world the way he would've wanted me to."

One of Jiraiya's bushy white eyebrows raises. "And how's that going?"

"Horribly," Izuna admits robotically. He's screaming in his soul, wanting to cry, admit his guilty conscience, tell *someone* just how much it hurts to wake up and keep walking forward. But he won't. He can't. He's not supposed to be those kinds of things. He's not allowed.

Izuna slips up plenty of times, admits to his guilt and sorrow, but this is not one of them. The tanto does nothing, it's not there to intimidate Jiraiya, but for Izuna to anchor himself in something familiar. "This world needs saving. I'm no hero but I can't let it end the way it does."

Jiraiya blinks slowly, like it all dawns on him all at once, like he's cracked the code to figuring out Izuna. He hates it, he hates how paper thin he is, how incredibly transparent he can be. "Ah…" Jiraiya nods, not caring that there's still the sharp edge of Izuna's tanto shoved directly under his chin, "I see."

What do you see? Izuna stares at him, willing an answer without a single word.

“Then what is it that you need from me, Sasuke Uchiha?” His own name sounds like a curse to his ears. His voice is filled with scorn, almost mocking. Izuna raises his guards up.

“I need you to never say my name again,” Izuna starts. It causes Jiraiya to snort, but he ignores that, “I need Konoha to follow through on their word; ally with Uzushio. I know the chances of Kurama being double crossed is high. There’s nothing more flimsy than a treaty on paper. I need to keep my independence from Konoha. I know that the second I step through those gates someone is going to want me on a tight leash…or throw me into prison-”

Jiraiya shakes his head. “I’m pretty sure you *killed* the person who would want to.”

Silence descends upon them. *Was this a bluff, or did he really figure out I killed Danzo?*

Jiraiya tilts his head. “Or…not?”

Fuck it. “No, I killed Danzo.”

“Oh,” Jiraiya breathes out, “I thought I got you wrong for a second.”

Izuna’s eyebrows furrow. “You’re not mad.”

Another scoff. “You killed him for a reason, I take it? I wouldn’t put it past a guy like Danzo to do something pathetically stupid in the future.”

Izuna blinks. Was it that simple? It can’t be *that simple?* “How can you believe in me already?” He asks, completely baffled.

Jiraiya’s eye flick to the left side of his face, Izuna’s poorly concealed rinnegan. “You know, there’s this…old story about eyes like that. A god’s eyes that would be the world’s salvation. Or its destruction. Tell me. When your world ended, did its cataclysm have eyes like that?”

Madara’s rinnegan would haunt his dreams for all of eternity. He lowers his tanto completely, until the edge rests coldly between them. “It did,” Izuna says.

Jiraiya sighs an old, tired sigh. He looks away, lost in thought. “I thought I saw salvation in a different pair of eyes. But…I guess I was wrong.”

“Nagato’s rinnegan were never his own,” Izuna mutters, watches carefully as Jiraiya's head snaps back up to him. “They were Madara’s. The *real* Madara. He’s the one. Our destruction.”

Jiraiya’s mouth quirks into a grin. “Then I suppose it’s only fitting that the one named Izuna is our salvation.”

* * *

Obito's blood dries into a caked, red-brown sleeve by the time Izuna finally emerges from Jiraiya's tent. Riddled with an anxious energy, that feeling of fragile belief clinging to him, only escalates when he sees the half circle of sentinel-like guards standing at the entrance. He stops short to glare right back at their blank faces, catches the way Shisui's eye narrows at him, scowls behind his mask no doubt. Everything can go so wrong in an instant. Jiraiya could burst out and proclaim him for what he is, where he came from, and his *name,* Something that Izuna denounces as once his.

Izuna counts them and comes up one short. His mind almost immediately delves into the worst case scenarios. Somehow, Obito came back already and—and Kakashi is somehow *dead* somewhere and all these *idiots* are just standing here waiting for him to, to what exactly?

"Where's Kakashi?" He asks before he can go run off to find out if his fears are true.

Itachi points to the far edge of their camp where the firelight barely reaches. "Over there, sulking," Itachi deadpans. He's about to say something else when Shisui cuts him off.

"Are you gonna tell us who that guy was, or is that too much to ask of you?"

"I just saved your life, and you're still this hostile?" Izuna rolls his eyes. His heartbeat never seems to settle. It pounds loudly in his ears, threatening to leap out of his chest. It's making him sick.

Shisui puffs up like an angry cat. He mumbles under his breath, "you started that fight, anyway…"

Izuna sighs. "That man is what you call a menace to society. If you ever see him, run the other way."

"He's probably going to die," Itachi says, "That was a chidori, wasn't it? I've never seen anyone survive."

Izuna frowns. He doesn't really like that implication—that Itachi has seen it used so many times. "Maybe…if I struck his heart. But I missed."

Itachi's eyes narrow ever so slightly, clearly disbelieving.

"Whatever," Izuna waves them off before either can start spewing their theories on him, "Do either of you know where a river is?"

"Why?" Shisui snaps at him just to be a bastard. Izuna raises his arm without a word. Shisui clicks his tongue, endless irritation rolling off him in waves. He knows what is about to happen next. They all understand it. Izuna's about to disappear and leave them with more questions than he'll ever answer. So typical of him, really. Izuna's becoming predictable. Shisui's eyes roll. "It's about a quarter mile southwest."

Izuna nods curtly, then he turns on his heel and walks away. Surprisingly, no one decides to follow him. He's grateful for it, truly, because Izuna is keeping himself together on pure

stress alone. It's the kind of stress that's so overwhelming that it feels like nothing. He can barely feel his own feet hitting the ground, or the uncomfortable crackle of dried blood on his skin. He can't feel his lungs expanding and collapsing, or the air passing through his nose. And worst of all, he doesn't know if he's guilty or sad or angry or so unbelievably relieved that only one person died in that encounter—and selfishly, he's even grateful to the universe that it wasn't someone that he cares about. The person who died was faceless to him.

But someone, somewhere, must've cared about them. Despite everything Naruto has taught him, he can't bring himself to care much about this person, only that he blames himself for letting Obito get so close without realizing it.

He continues on pure auto pilot, finding the river by chance rather than hearing it. His head is fuzzy, blocking out almost all the noises around him. The last time he was like this was when he nearly drowned himself in the waterfall after his mental breakdown over Kurama. He supposes this is just another kind of rude awakening. One that has severely worse consequences should it all go ary.

Izuna has put his faith in Jiraiya. Now all he can do is *believe.* He's not very good at it, though…that whole believing thing. That's Naruto's thing, not his. He's not a dreamer like them. He should go back there and erase Jiraiya's memory once and for all. He should erase *all* their memories. Take every bit of himself, Kurama, and even Naruto, from their minds and leave them here with nothing but a fading impression.

He kneels by the river and stares at the black blotch of his reflection. He doesn't look very human, more like a phantom, a shade, a shadow. He dunks his hand into the frozen depths, and the shock snaps his senses back into place. Izuna swears quietly under his breath, sucks in a pleasantly frosty lungful of air, smells the cold and water, hears the gurgling of the stream, and—

"You just gonna stand there like a fucking creep, or come talk to me?"

There's a moment when he's only speaking to the faint whistling of an autumn wind. Kakashi flickers down beside him, rustling the leaves and disturbing the stones by the river's edge. They've all become predictable, it seems.

Izuna doesn't look up. He submerges his entire arm up to his elbow and scrubs until his skin is raw and numb. He can't believe he almost killed Kakashi's childhood friend with the same jutsu that Kakashi used to kill his *other* childhood friend. Izuna's a bit fucked up for that. In the moment it felt so right, like *justice.* Now, he can't look Kakashi in the eye.

"Maa, I remember you saying something similar when we first met." Kakashi's tone is light, clearly avoiding the heavy topic that looms over them. Izuna scrubs his skin harder until it burns. Is he crazy, or is the blood not coming out?

"And? At least I'm consistent."

"Consistently a pain in the ass, maybe," Kakashi's joke lands painfully flat. Izuna stops his incessant cleaning to look up. He almost catches Kakashi's eye, then averts his gaze higher, to his hitai-ate. There, another blotchy and dark reflection, distorted and shadowy, of himself.

He turns back to his arm and starts itching at the skin, freshly pink from the frigid river water. He picks at the blood underneath his fingernails and finds chips of bone.

“Izuna…what happened?”

Izuna can barely stand the tone that Kakashi’s voice takes up. It’s dark and cold and quiet. Fragile and concerning, as if Kakashi is talking to nothing but a frightened animal. Izuna hates it.

It breaks him.

“There’s about a million and one things that I have to keep track of,” he says, “And…I don’t know if what I’m doing is correct.” *And you, you’re about half of my problems and I don’t know what to do with you—* Izuna hisses at his own uselessness and stupidity. ”How am I supposed to fix things? I don’t know how. All I’ve managed to do is piss people off and make everyone hate me. Did you see how Shisui looks at me, how…how *Itachi* looks at me? Like they want to rip my head off or something.”

“What?” Kakashi sounds genuinely surprised for once. Izuna pauses his erratic itching for half a second. “That’s not how I see it at all. I’ve never seen them act like this with anyone else. They’re acting like kids,” Kakashi scoffs, Izuna hears a smile behind it, “I’ve never seen them behave so young before…so…immature. They want to know you but they don’t know how, you make a bit difficult—”

“I don’t know *how* to not be difficult!” Izuna snarls. His frustration falls into his anger and guilt. Naruto would be so much better than him. Naruto wouldn’t have tried to kill Obito. Naruto wouldn’t be so difficult to be around. Naruto could function without him. Naruto wouldn’t be so caught up by only a few things to do. He wouldn’t be doing *any* of this in the way that Izuna has.

The way *Sasuke* has.

Whenever he breathes, he can’t get enough air in. Thoughts swirl in a miasma around his head. *What if Jiraiya decides I’m not worth the risk? What if Obito or Zetsu try to attack us again? What if I can't get a message to Kurama in time? What if I haven't done anything useful yet? Did I really stop the massacre with the death of one person? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much?*

“You don’t…You don’t know anything! You couldn’t possibly-” Izuna stops himself. His next inhale is sharp as he sucks in his hurtful words and swallows them whole. *You couldn’t possibly understand.*

When he realizes his mistake he looks, finally, to see the damage that he has caused—that he’s always caused. And to his surprise there’s real emotion there; hurt and tension in the line of Kakashi’s shoulders. Anguish, devastation, understanding swirling through his one silver eye. Like he *knows* more than he should. Knows and gets it to an uncomfortable degree.

It’s different from the null-and-void he remembers from his sensei. When he spat similar words at him. When he ran from all hope of friendship and loyalty and love. When Sasuke

knew nothing.

He's supposed to be above all that now. He's supposed to have learned something, be *better,* be *different* than before. But the only thing different here is Kakashi. Izuna jolts back from him as if he were struck. When he turns it's with a stutter, but he's brought back to his fidgeting by the numbing water running over his skin, cooling down all the fire building in his chest, just about ready to explode.

"You see? I'm bad at this shit. No one ever taught me to be…good. To be kind. To *play nice.* I was raised on betrayal and hatred—but that's all just an excuse, isn't it?" Naruto's smile flashes before his eyes. "There's no justifying my shit behavior or my hateful words. I should just…" *Die.*

But he can't say that. Not to Kakashi.

Itching turns into scratching. He scores his nails down the seal on his forearm, welts of broken blood vessels spring to life, leaving trails of bruising pink and red. He can still feel it—pulsing flesh around his arm, the life draining out of a body, bones crackling like scrolls in a fire. Between clenched teeth he gasps out, "And this *fucking blood-"* He doesn't get to finish that sentement. Kakashi snatches Izuna's hand out of the water in one violent pull.

The second Izuna stops struggling, Kakashi's grip loosens enough for him to escape.

Neither of them move.

"It's…it's not going to go away," Kakashi mutters. His eyes lower to inspect the marks Izuna has left, marred on his own flesh. He can barely feel the sting in his skin. What he feels is Kakashi's feather light touch brushing over them, oh so gentle as if one wrong move and Izuna would fracture, fall apart, rupture into millions and millions of pieces. "This isn't something you can really *wash away."*

This is the regular bullshit, isn't it? Izuna tells himself. Because how could it not, when Kakashi looks at him like that? Izuna has despised that look on thousands of faces before, and he'll despise it on a thousand faces after. But right now? Does he hate it *now?*

Izuna doesn't deserve admiration or adoration. He deserves the harsh glare of the sun staring down on him, burning him alive and chasing away all the wretched shadows within himself. Eyes are the window to the soul. In Kakashi's, he focuses on his own visage in a ring of silver. If he looks any deeper, he's terrified of what he might find instead.

"Why are you here, Kakashi?" He whispers. The muscles in Kakashi's fingers twitch around his forearm. "Kurama's not here to boss you around. Jiraiya doesn't want you anywhere near me. Your friends and teammates are just over there, waiting for you. And yet-"

"-Here I am?"

"Here you are."

Kakashi looks up, away from him. Instead of Izuna's blurred form, his eye shines with the moon. He smiles too softly for someone like Kakashi. Too genuine, a real smile that's terribly tragic to witness even behind a mask. "Is it so difficult to believe that I do what I want sometimes?" Izuna doesn't say anything, which is enough of an answer. "Why did you send me those scrolls if you didn't want me here?"

Izuna's mouth goes dry. "I was scared," he says truthfully. It's not the full truth.

"Of what?" Kakashi presses further.

Izuna tries not to rip his arm away. Instead he focuses on the moonlight, which casts a silver lining over the clouds. "Don't you know? Asking questions will get you nowhere. I've told you plenty."

"Maybe I want to know more."

Izuna gets one of his terrible, cruel ideas. "Then I'll make you a deal-"

Kakashi mutters under his breath, "not this again," but he doesn't move.

"-I'll tell you how I got my mangekyou sharingan," now *that* gets his attention, and quick. Kakashi's grumbling ceases to exist. "But you have to tell me too."

Kakashi's hand that's not still curled around Izuna's arm goes up to cover his already covered sharingan. "I don't…I don't know what you're-"

"Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about."

"No, I mean…I don't really know what caused-" He dies off awkwardly when Izuna raises one of his eyebrows.

"I think you do," Izuna sighs, "It's not exactly something that you'd forget. Something you can't really… *wash out."* His words have their desired effect, perhaps a little too much as Kakashi inhales sharply. "So. Do we have a deal?"

Kakashi scowls. He grips his hitai-ate and pulls it further down like he's protecting his eye from Izuna's own. He leans away, but he never lets go of Izuna's arm. "You already know, don't you? Then what's the point?" He says bitterly. *Anxiously.*

But something bitter twists in Izuna as well. He finds that he's the one to rip himself away. Kakashi's hand clings around nothing for a second before they both retract into themselves. *What did I expect from him anyway? I was right, this is the typical bullshit.* "Is that all this is to you? Information gathering?" Izuna spits. "And here I thought you were different from the rest of them. If it wasn't your job to do so, would you really even *care?"*

"That's not what I meant and you know it," Kakashi's voice is perpetually level, even if it shakes, rises and falls with tension written all over it. "You're the one who's tied up in lies. Why should I tell you something you already know? Why should I tell you anything when I don't even know your real name? Why should I…live through that again for your own amusement?

“Your suffering does not *amuse* me.”

“Are you sure about that? Because you seemed pretty smug with yourself when you practically dared me to kill you.” Despite the even inflection, Izuna picks up on the traces of pain and betrayal. Kakashi’s voice shakes with it. It’s raw. He hasn’t learned to let go of his anger yet, or how to process his grief yet. He’s more like Izuna than ever before or ever again.

Izuna opens his mouth to retort. But all his anger sticks like glue. He swallows it, a patch of thorns down his throat that settles uneasily in his stomach. When he breathes he feels it scratching. He wants to scream. He wants to tell Kakashi that they’re both fucking idiots. That they’re both hurt, and hurting each other won’t solve anything. He wants to tell Kakashi a thousand things. But there’s only one thing that Izuna should be saying.

Izuna shuts his eyes and lowers his head. *Naruto, this is the right thing to do, isn’t it?*

“I’m sorry,” he says. He hears Kakashi shift, but he doesn’t look up. “I’m sorry that I lie to you, and that I can’t tell you my name. I’m sorry that I’ve caused a lot of problems, that an anbu died because of my carelessness…”

And the more he talks the more he realizes just *how much* pain he’s caused. It keeps piling up and tumbling out. Izuna folds in on himself, his voice thick with shame. “I’m sorry I keep snapping at you when you’ve done literally nothing wrong. I keep telling you that I trust you, but everything I say and do denies that. I’m sorry I can’t keep a promise, that I keep changing my plans, that I can’t follow through with what I say. And I’m sorry I’ve hurt you because of my own selfishness.”

The only people he’s ever properly apologized to are Naruto and Kurama. He didn’t get the chance to say this to anyone else. Sakura never heard it. Kakashi never heard it. Nor anyone from Konoha. Sasuke never got this opportunity. Sasuke could never take the plunge. Sasuke’s most precious people all died before he was ready.

There is this silence again, oppressive and all around them. It chokes Izuna this time instead of calming his nerves. It wraps tightly over his neck as he waits for some sort of reply.

He gets a soft sigh. “Why is it so important that *I’m* the one who tells you?” Kakashi asks.

When Izuna looks up, he’s not expecting to see that he’s already been forgiven. But that’s exactly what he gets. Something else catches his breath. Something he doesn’t really want to name. Something about moonlight making halos in Kakashi’s silver hair, silver lining in his eye, draped in the night’s colors. Colors that Izuna always thought were his.

“Humans can’t be summed up by just facts,” Izuna finally says when he gains his composure back again, “Nor can their history.”

Kakashi hesitates at that. His entire body wavers like he’s about to run away. But he doesn’t. “Shinobi aren’t supposed to be human. We’re supposed to be tools.”

“According to you and half the world, I’m supposed to be a yokai.” Izuna wrinkles his eyebrows slightly. “You can call shinobi whatever you like, but your story isn’t defined in clean lines or report logs. There are things that simply don’t fit neatly within all of that, things that only *you* know.”

He’s almost certain, as Kakashi sits there staring at him like he’s lost his head, that Izuna’s finally scared him away for good. But he doesn’t retreat into himself like Izuna expects him to. He hovers there, unsure.

So Izuna gives another push, takes the first step, jumps right in before his brain can stop himself.

Because he’s supposed to know now. How to be better.

Being vulnerable is difficult. Every word he speaks feels like it's ripping its way out of his chest, thorny and clawing to remain tucked without the darkest parts of Izuna’s heart. “I can’t remember the sound of my mother’s laugh,” He says, “no matter how hard I try, I just can’t. I don’t remember what her food tasted like either. Or the smell of her perfume. Or if she even *wore* perfume. I don’t really know anymore.”

He looks out across the running water, at the wavering, waning moon in its reflection. “What I remember is her face. How her hair clung to it with blood. How her eyes were wide as they stared right through me. How her body was twisted oddly on the floor. My brother killed our parents. He killed all of us except for me. Since that day, I lived simply to kill him.”

He lifts one shoulder in a half shrug. “When he died—when I killed him—he smiled at me.” Izuna’s eyes swirl to life, first it's just tomoe, then it blooms into its flower-like pattern. He turns to face Kakashi, but purposefully looks down, not meeting his eye. He doesn’t know if it's because he himself can’t bear to see the pity on his face, or if he’s doing it so he doesn’t scare Kakashi off.

“I found out afterwards that my brother was only… *following orders.* Someone forced his hand. Used me as leverage. Made him believe that killing us was the only way to prevent more deaths in the future. But that’s no excuse. He still killed our family. I still hate him for what he did. But I loved him too.”

He runs his thumb over the seal on his arm, acting as if he could smudge the ink away. It remains, stubbornly. Just another scar he can’t remove. Tiny pink beads of his blood well up and smear across his skin. The results of his self-destruction.

He startles slightly when hands reach for him once again. “It seems the only one who can hurt you is yourself,” Kakashi mutters. He produces a roll of bandages from the pack on his hip. And for a second they just linger there. Kakashi hesitates, perhaps wondering if this will end up like last time. Like Izuna snapping at him or saying cruel things for the sake of pushing him away.

But Izuna focuses on the differences this time. This isn’t Naruto, after all. There’s no bright sunlight cascading down around them, or the binding inferno of an activated seal. Kakashi’s

eye isn't red, and doesn't turn red while he carefully winds the wrapping up Izuna's arm. And Izuna is not dying.

There's a tightness in his chest regardless. His breathing still stutters and his side starts to ache, starts to burn as if he'd somehow reopened his wounds. When he blinks he can see Naruto's blue eyes, his smiling face, his golden hair on the backs of his eyelids.. And when he opens his eyes again, all he sees is silver.

"She was part of my genin team," Kakashi says unexpectedly. His hands still their work. A war rages in the sliver of his exposed face.

"Hn."

"I-I…My other teammate. I promised him I'd protect her. I *promised* him something and I…" He sighs, resumes, then stops once again like he can't figure out exactly what to do with himself while he speaks. "I was…supposed to save her. That was the whole point of the mission. But she'd been turned into a jinchuuriki."

"I didn't know that," Izuna mutters. Kakashi's head snaps up so suddenly, he takes his hands, and the bandages he's clutching—which tighten around Izuna's arm—along with him. "Oi," Izuna snaps as he's yanked along, "you're cutting off my circulation."

"Oh," Kakashi loosens his hold. "But…but anyway. They made her seal faulty on purpose-"

"She was a bomb," Izuna finishes. Kakashi nods once. Izuna knows what happens next. Kakashi kills Rin with a chidori through her heart while Obito watches from the sidelines. It awakens their mangekyou sharingan, and sets Obito down his violent, dark path.

"She told me to kill her." Kakashi mutters.

"...oh." Izuna tries not to drown in his own guilt then and there. "I really am cruel."

Kakashi chuckles humorlessly. "That you are." He finishes his work and stares at Izuna's arm like he's not really there. He's far off, somewhere else. And just to drive that home, Izuna sees a trickle of blood darkening the already dark fabric of his mask. This has happened before, hasn't it?

And what did Izuna do next, that night which felt like too long ago? He reaches forward and pulls Kakashi's hitai-ate up as if he can't stop his own hands from doing so. The pinwheel spins. Kakashi stares at him like a deer in headlights.

They're just dancing in circles at this point. Neither going forward nor backwards. Izuna's stuck, isn't he? Trapped in a revolving door of lies and betrayal and cruelty. There's not much room for things like hopes and dreams in this brutal cycle, not after his hopes and dreams all died the day he was dumped here.

But maybe.

Just maybe.

He can find a silver lining.

Chapter End Notes

(This note is specifically for new readers!)

Hey you might see some comments of me and others talking about things that are not related to the fic, but to me, the author. I decided to go through a delete some of my previous notes which were of things happening IRL, I don't feel comfortable keeping them up as they were, so some I deleted outright (like this chapter) and some were pruned down. I decided to leave the comments because I know writing comments can be daunting for some and I don't want to discourage anyone from writing them, and they also had good discussions about the actual fic. Those words aren't mine and it doesn't feel right for me to simply take them down.

None of this is really serious, I just got shy abt my personal life so... ANYWAY!! IM SO GLAD YOU'VE MADE IT THIS FAR INTO THE FIC!!

Feathers and Smoke

Chapter Notes

T/W: Blood, panic attacks (?) canon typical violence aha

Yooo this chapter kind of has a slow start but then the ball rolls and KEEPS on FUCKING R o l l i n g, hope you enjoy ✨✨

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A shadow moves across the sky, only visible as it blocks out clouds and stars. It lands on a willow branch overhanging a silver river. A curious thing. Crows. They like to watch, to listen, to observe. Often they're said to be the messengers of gods.

Often they're spies.

The crow spots its targets. Two figures crouched by the edge of the river, low voices muttering out secrets and stories with only the moon as a witness. And the winged shadow called a crow.

Its eyes are sharper than most. The crow sees everything. It sees the way the man's lips move, and the words being spoken even if it's too far away to hear them. It understands the look of grief crossing over moonlit features, the lines of frowns etching onto a young face.

The crow watches Izuna's secrets as they unfold, as he gives them away to Kakashi, and as Kakashi gives secrets back in exchange. Confessions of death and ruin are curled around loneliness. Around love. Around people simply wanting other people. The crow notes when the two collide, when Kakashi reaches out and holds onto Izuna's arm, when neither lets go, when they shatter as they rip apart and come back together. Two eyes of two different storms. Two broken shards of glass that don't fit into the same shattered mirror.

But they're a mirror nonetheless.

Kakashi's back is turned to the crow's curious eyes, and regardless, he wears a mask that a crow can't read. He hides too much. The crow doesn't see whatever Izuna sees or hear what Izuna hears, that makes his eyes go wide and soft and whisper about cruelty.

The crow only knows what Izuna says, and Izuna says a lot for a man who is usually so quiet about himself.

Kinkiller. The crow already knew that. *But…* there's always a reason, isn't there? Trickery, lies, and loyalty make up the shinobi world, and wherever Izuna came from is no exception. *Izuna's brother killed his family, what he did was justice.* If the crow had a thought it would be this.

But of course, sharp eyes and fast wings are always subject to faster eyes and faster wings. The crow tends to panic when it's caught. And even a bold crow knows when to flee. But how can it flee when Izuna's sharingan pierces right through its mind, through the smoke and feathers of its physical form and drags its consciousness out?

Itachi opens his eyes in an all too familiar place. He can see the Uchiha crest hanging from small square banners, streets filled with red and black fans. He hears laughter that squeezes at his heart and threatens it to burst. He shoots upward, cataloging Izuna's location before putting several feet between them."What is this place?" He snaps.

Izuna's visible eye is dark once again. It narrows. "Don't act stupid."

"You know I'm a clone right? It doesn't matter if you torture me, I'll dissapear before you can do any real damage."

Izuna sighs, his shoulders drooping with it. His posture is non threatening but Itachi doesn't let it fool him. He's trapped in Izuna's genjutsu, but the place he's chosen as the battlefield is…"This is my memory," Itachi straightens up as he realizes it.

Izuna glances around with the beginnings of a smile curling up onto his stoic face. "Hn…" he hums. Both of them hear the loud chatter of a child and turn towards the commotion.

Itachi's heart jumps when he sees himself. And then it melts when he sees Sasuke on his younger self's shoulders. Sasuke is loud, and unbalanced, and he hits Itachi's head every now and again, or pulls on the end of his ponytail.

"When are you gonna teach me how your shuriken jutsu?" Sasuke whines and kicks his feet, nearly tipping over in the process.

"Soon."

"Soons not now!"

"That is correct."

"Oh c'mon!"

And Itachi remembers why he never wanted to teach Sasuke. He remembers it as this memory version of himself smiles through a grimace. Sasuke is still young. He's still a tiny little child. And he shouldn't have to learn how to kill at the same age Itachi did. *I'll protect him so he doesn't have to learn. I'll do whatever it takes to make sure he's safe.*

He catches Izuna's careful gaze watching them with the intensity of a hawk. Something dark lights up his eye, his own memories flashing just as vivid. Maybe Izuna is remembering his own brother.

"Why are we here?" Itachi mutters. Izuna has already mentioned that he knows about Sasuke, but this just exposes Itachi's weakness even more. He's much too vulnerable here, in his own mind surrounded by happy memories. If Izuna wanted to take his soul and crush it, he'd start

here, wouldn't he? It makes his nerves crawl. Itachi has never felt so uncomfortable in his own skin before. "This has nothing to do with you."

Izuna's glare is something fierce. It pierces right through him, petulant and stubborn and so much like something Itachi should *know* but he doesn't. It's off kilter, especially while he's surrounded by familiar buildings in the Uchiha district. So out of place, and yet he fits in *too well.* His entire existence is dissonance. Chaos.

Itachi shuts his mouth, and the two follow the memory. They both watch as Sasuke laughs and howls at something Itachi says, and then gets pissy when Shisui comes dropping down from the rooftops to beckon Itachi away.

Before they can part however, Izuna pulls Itachi in a different direction. The scene sways and rolls under their feet as time and space warp into something new. Izuna rips it down around them like wallpaper. They're in the forest now, resting in the tree branches as they watch a hog hunt below. Sasuke has his bow and arrow, shaking arms drawing back his string.

He looks much too adorable to be killing something. With his chest puffed out, and his form imbalanced, and his eyebrows pointed down into a fierce pout. His hands are trembling too much. It's no surprise to anyone that he misses. Regardless, he can't help but feel that stab of pride that he's gotten this far.

He looks at Izuna. He wants to say something, something about how great Sasuke could be. About how his brother has all the potential in the world. Sasuke is *good.* Sasuke is *kind.* Sasuke is gentle where he is not. Sasuke has no blood on his hands. Sasuke's hands are clean. Itachi finds that Izuna is already watching him, studying *him* as he studies Sasuke.

And not just him, but the memory of him who also watches from between the leaves, who grins in vicious pride as Sasuke resets and hits his mark this time, aided by Itachi's kunai to lure the pig out into a better spot for him.

"You have a lot of pride in your brother," Izuna says. As simple as that.

In the background, Itachi can hear Sasuke's excitement over his kill. "My brother is someone to be proud of." Itachi counters easily. It's the truth after all. "Maybe you wouldn't get it. But he's better than me."

"Better than you?" Izuna's brow furrows. His eye roams over Itachi, then returns to the scene below. Itachi and Sasuke tie up the pig and start their journey back to the Uchiha district. Sasuke laughs. And laughs. And laughs. "There's—from what I hear—there's no one better than you."

It's Itachi's turn to scoff. He looks down just as Sasuke turns to Itachi and smiles, wide and bright and innocent. *I want it to stay that way.* "There's always people better than me."

"Hn." Izuna spins his eyes again, and the scene shifts once more. This time, they're sitting on top of wooden pillars watching Itachi demonstrating his shuriken jutsu for Sasuke to copy. Sasuke gets it wrong. He doesn't have a sharingan. He doesn't even have the physical skills developed to try. He needs to work harder, more, longer, for him to ever come close.

But…he shouldn't have to. I'll protect him. I'll do whatever it takes to keep him safe. Why does he want to follow me down this path? Itachi bites his cheek as he watches. "I never wanted to teach him this."

"He has to learn eventually," Izuna says. His dark eye always seems to swirl, recording everything even without his sharingan active. "That's the kind of world you live in." There's an accusation brewing, Itachi can practically feel it. "One where children are called weapons." *There it is.* What Itachi had said back on Uzushio about the Jinchuuriki.

"If I'm anything, it's a hypocrite." Itachi sighs.

Izuna stays silent at that. They watch as Sasuke hits three of the targets and runs up to Itachi to tackle his legs. Itachi stares at the scene, remembering how Sasuke had been crying shortly after this when he twisted his ankle. He knows it's coming, he knows it'll happen. The past can't be changed, afterall, but when he watches Sasuke stumble he still stands, every nerve in his body humming for him to do something about it. He stays rooted to his spot. He can only observe.

"We're all hypocrites," Izuna says, "We're a bunch of liars telling other liars not to lie. What a load of bullshit." He hangs his head, peers out from between the gaps in his bangs, dark eye always searching him for something— *someone.*

"Your brother was a liar, wasn't he?" Itachi asks on a limb.

Izuna hums and tilts his head back. Down below, Sasuke and Itachi walk away. They're left in the empty field. "The best kind."

"He did something terrible to you."

"He's the reason I'm alive," Izuna counters as easily as breathing. "And he paid the price already, so it…doesn't *matter,* does it?" Itachi can see his jaw wired tight the more he speaks. *It matters when you're still suffering because of him.* "You'd lie to keep Sasuke safe, wouldn't you?"

Itachi swallows his immediate response. He would. He wouldn't hesitate to lie to Sasuke's face if it meant keeping him from harm's way. But he can't say it. Izuna doesn't let up. Even as the memory fades away and leaves the two in a desolate training ground, he doesn't bother to switch the scenes, to rip up the wallpaper of Itachi's life right before his eyes.

"What are you looking for in all of this?" Itachi mutters, "You already know about Sasuke. What are you trying to prove?"

"Am I proving anything?" Izuna snaps right back. He runs his fingers through his hair distractedly, "I'm observing you, is all."

"What for?"

"I want to know if you're ready," Izuna says, and he takes the forest around them and swirls it into darkness. This time, when the ground settles, they're inside his house. Itachi glares at

him as they watch the dinner unfold.

He's testing *me*... "Ready for *what?"*

Izuna doesn't need to see this… he doesn't need to know all of this…

But of course, Izuna doesn't answer. Instead, he listens to the loud rattling of dishes as Sasuke slams his palm down on the table in his excitement. "And then this kid—What was his name? Whatever! He's annoying, and stupid, and he thinks he's *all that* when he's not!"

"You can't go around punching people for no reason, Sasuke." Fugaku sighs and drags his hand down his face.

Sasuke sits up and bangs a knee on the table. He doesn't seem to care. "He's the one who started the fight!"

"How did he start the fight?" the memory Itachi asks him.

Sasuke grows sullen. "He called me an idiot."

Itachi grins. The memory of himself also grins. "It's true, I saw it happen." Itachi mutters the same time his memory says, "so you punched him…"

"You're always watching over him, huh…" Izuna muses to himself. Itachi looks up to see him quietly smiling.

"Why wouldn't I? He's my brother. That's what…" Itachi dies off. *That's what brother's do.* Older brothers don't kill their younger brothers. Older brothers protect. Older brothers are there to spoil the younger ones. Itachi is here to take the burden off of Sasuke's shoulders. So that Sasuke may live a better life. Carefree, innocent, clean of blood.

Izuna's brother tried to protect him. Izuna's brother walked the darkest path and dragged Izuna down with him. Izuna's brother…failed him.

"I'm going to ask you again. Would you lie to keep Sasuke safe?" Izuna asks, shocking him out of his thoughts. One second, Itachi is watching Sasuke scream about Naruto and school, the next Izuna has ripped away the memory and they land at the gates of the Uchiha compound.

The moon is large and full and low in the sky.

"I would." He doesn't deny it this time. "I'd do *anything* for him."

"Hn…" Izuna regards him with a narrow eye. In the dark, Itachi can see the glow of his rinnegan from between the stands of his hair. He tries not to make his staring obvious. He fails spectacularly. "Good."

Why is that good? If anything, Sasuke is Itachi's fatal flaw. His one absolute, his crutch, his exception. Was Izuna attempting to blackmail him? But that would be impossible. Sasuk was safe in Konoha with their parents and the rest of the clan and the rest of *Konoha.* And Izuna

himself hasn't shown any signs of wanting to hurt innocent people. He's the exact opposite, actually.

Itachi looks around. He should get away from Izuna before he can try anything, but if Izuna catches on, then he'll surely be trapped in some sort of torture. Something is strange about this night though. He starts to walk forwards, to explore this new memory that Izuna has picked out. But instead, Izuna leans against the pillar of the gate and crosses his ankles.

"Don't go in there just yet," Izuna mutters. Itachi doesn't question him out loud, and he ignores the inkling of unese that rests on his shoulders as he leans against the opposite pillar and copies Izuna's posture.

Itachi looks up to the moon. "I don't recall if I've had any particular nights like this…" It all seems so…typical. This night could have been one of thousands. So far, Izuna has been picking memories with both him and Sasuke. But now, neither of them were in sight.

"No…you wouldn't…" Izuna scoffs. Itachi watches him carefully, how his eye darts around, skittish like a wild animal, how his shoulders hunch inwards on himself. But he watches Izuna's hand the most, as it raises, as he gestures for Itachi to come forward just like… *just like he'd do to Sasuke.* It's a silent command, beckoning him forward, and Itachi goes as is possessed.

It's here where things really start to unravel. Where impossibilities start to flood Itachi's mind faster than he can dispel them. Each one is more ridiculous than the last and all of them tangle up Itachi's logic like cobwebs. He walks forward regardless, like he's stepping towards the gates of hell and Izuna is there to ferry him across.

He closes the couple of feets between them until he stands, stock still before chaos itself and waits. All the while he can feel the truth slip out from between his grasping hands. He can feel reality itself bending to the will of Izuna's eyes, he knows that what he's seeing are no illusions, only recollections. That's not what Itachi's thinking about then. What he thinks about is the truth so plain to see that he's missed it all this time. It's been here, staring at him with eyes just like his own, and a face so similar it's uncanny.

A mirror nonetheless.

"When I killed my brother," Izuna begins, and it throws Itachi's mind into disarray just thinking about it. About a brother killing the other. About him standing there, facing Sasuke just like this, with eyes just like this.

"He smiled at me." Izuna's own mouth draws into a smirk, something that would seem so careless if his eyes weren't so honest. "Ah, you're starting to get it, aren't you? Well, he reached up like this," Izuna hand raises, Itachi sees it from a mile away, and yet no part of him dares to move. As if he could control any part of his body in this second anyway. It's all ice and fire in his lungs anyway…

When Izuna taps his forehead.

Shatters Itachi's mind in the process.

And then smiles.

“And then he said…’forgive me-”

“Sasuke,” Itachi suddenly can’t breathe. He can’t feel his legs. He chokes. He stumbles. He backs away from the gates of hell but Izuna doesn’t let him get very far.

They’re in *his* memories after all. Itachi thought these memories were of his own, but no. They’re *Izuna’s.* They’re *Sasuke’s.*

Invisible snakes crawl over every inch of his skin, biting and poisonous fangs paralyze him, holding him still as the shadow of his brother looms taller, blocking out the moon.

“If you’re Sasuke then-" *Then I’m his brother…* “What have I done? What did I…” *I killed us. I actually did it.* “No… *no, you can’t be..!”* Itachi hisses, he shuts his eyes, to get Izuna’s face out of his head, but it doesn’t *work*— of course it’s not going to work, of course!

The truth stares at him with mismatched eyes. He knows these eyes. He *knows, he knows he knows…*

Itachi looks around. “Then this night is…?”

Izuna— *Sasuke*— only nods, just as Sasuke, *his Sasuke,* turns the corner of the Konoha streets and waltzes up to where the two of them crowd the entrance. Itachi can only watch as Sasuke walks between them, his arm passes through Izuna’s— *Sasuke’s…*— cloak as if he were a shade.

He’s tiny, frail, nothing but a child. He doesn’t deserve to look like darkness is his best friend. Sasuke shouldn’t look like death incarnate. He shouldn’t be wrapped up in chaos. He shouldn’t wear a cloak of hatred and have it fit so well across a face that’s seen so much torment and pain.

“No, *no…* Why aren’t you doing anything?” Itachi reaches out. He knows it’s pointless. Logically. But when it’s Sasuke…A hand snatches his wrist and shoves it down. He looks up sharply. Only to see that face. The face of his brother, all grown up. Those eyes he was supposed to protect. Now all he sees is tragedy written in the lines of this older version, hatred plain as day in the swirl of a sharingan.

His brother became a shadow. His brother became spiteful.

Izuna’s brother failed him.

Itachi failed Sasuke.

Sasuke looks forward, with all that *nothing* in his eyes, a terrifying mask descending down upon him as he takes Itachi and pushes him away from the gates. But Itachi resists. He stands and plants his feet in the ground and pushes right back. Sasuke’s grip only tightens around his arm. He shoves Itachi hard enough that he stumbles back. “What the hell are you doing?”

Itachi looks out past him, to where Sasuke turns the corner- “I need to see it-”

“No, you don’t want to see that.” There’s a finality in Sasuke’s voice that demands to be listened to. Itachi looks up and stares directly into his black void of an eye. “You don’t want to see that.”

“I think I deserve it. Don’t I, Sasuke?” And he lets his own sharingan spin.

“You don’t know what you’re doing!” There’s a hiss from Sasuke as he tries to look away, but it’s too late. Itachi folds Sasuke’s memories in on itself, worms his way through the gap in his consciousness and places himself inside Sasuke’s mind for real this time. The memory springs back up around him. Only this time, his perspective is completely different.

He has a tanto blade in his hand. Itachi recognizes it instantly. It’s *his* tanto. There’s a mask nestled to the side of his hair. There’s blood splattered down across his gray anbu vest. And most importantly, memories flood his mind. Thousands of them from a completely different life. Nothing changes until *everything* does. Until Danzo was never killed and until he’s suddenly being torn in two places. Until Shisui is falling and he’s trying to catch him, holding a bloody eye in one hand as he reaches down a waterfall, guilt crashes down around him, flooding him like a wave that never ends.

Until he’s being crushed by the weight of choice. Until that choice is taken away from him and he’s stuck down a path he doesn’t want. Until he’s back here, at the Uchiha compound, blood under his fingernails and across his face and leaking down from his eyes as he wipes them away hurriedly, gaze skirting over the bodies of felled *children* sleeping in their beds, elders on their porches, and the eyes of dozens of sharingan laying dull and lifeless in the streets.

Until he’s in his own house, holding a red-soaked tanto to his father’s neck. Until his father speaks and he can’t *take it anymore.* He tries to leave, to shut his eyes and run away, but when he opens them again it's to their bodies strewn on the floor—and he remembers the words Izuna had just said *“hair stuck to her face with blood, eyes wide and lifeless staring right through me.”* —and Sasuke is there.

Sasuke is staring at him in absolute terror. Itachi wants to scream, to rip at the walls of this memory he’s trapped himself in. He can barely hear the words that come from his own mouth, but Sasuke’s scream pierces right through the fabric of his soul. He’ll *never* forget this, will he? This memory isn’t even his and yet—

The wave of guilt that never ends.

I’m the one who ruins Sasuke’s life. I failed him.

And then he’s yanked, *pulled* from his own thoughts as he stares into the hazy form of Sasuke’s one-tomoe sharingan. Instead he sees a flowered Mangekyo, a rinnegan. And Sasuke. Standing by the side of his black-pebbled beach. And when he sees that face that should be his brother’s and can barely recognize the creature he’s become, it breaks him fully.

“I told you you didn’t want to see that,” Sasuke snaps at him. He dispels the last layer of his genjutsu.

The crow bursts into feathers and smoke.

* * *

Itachi sits next to Shisui between the roots of a large spruce tree. He's still a bit perturbed about everything that has happened tonight. They're all supposed to be resting, but with both Kakashi and Izuna away, and their mysterious attacker still alive and possibly stalking them, not a single soul in their encampment has gone to sleep. The remaining anbu held a short and swift ceremony for their fallen comrade while wrapping up the body with seals and scrolls to be examined and a proper funeral for later.

The one who died was a Hyuuga. There will be hell to pay if it gets out that Izuna purposefully missed the attacker's heart. Not that Itachi had any *real* evidence against him. But he knows what he saw, and he knows Izuna is a lot stronger than he'll even seem to let on.

"Are we certain Kakashi isn't under some genjutsu?" Shisui mumbles. He's been staring off at the spot Kakashi disappeared to about thirty minutes ago while Itachi cleans and sorts his gear. "I mean, when have you ever seen him act like this?"

Itachi looks up his organizing to stare at Shisui. "I disrupt his chakra all the time. There's no way you actually think that."

Shisui shrugs. "He's just being so obvious, I would expect more, I dunno, subtlety from someone like Kakashi."

"Love makes people do stupid things sometimes," Itachi shrugs a shoulder and continues to count and polish all his kunai.

Shisui sputters, sitting up off the tree trunk. "There's no way he's actually in *love* with Izuna, is there?"

Itachi raises an eyebrow and tilts his head as he counts. "You didn't see them on Uzushio. Kakashi disappeared one night and didn't come back until morning-"

"HOLY *SHIT-"*

Itachi whacks him in the shin. "Keep your voice down," he hisses, "it's not what you think."

Shisui's eyes narrow minutely, but he scoffs. "Did you stalk them or something? That's a new low, Itachi."

"I did *not.* When Kakashi came back he looked…depressed."

"So he got rejected."

"It's more complicated than that. Afterwards, Kakashi would follow him around all day until Izuna got sick of him. And Izuna started to avoid Kurama around the same time—"

"Wait, you don't think Kurama and Izuna…?"

“Get your head out of the gutter, Shisui,” Itachi says flatly. “Like I said, Izuna’s situation is complicated. You’d think that Izuna is absolutely smitten with Kurama if you watch how he looks at him when Kurama’s not paying attention, but that’s not it. Kurama told us that it’s because he looks similar to Izuna’s dead boyfriend.”

Shisui winces. “Ouch, that’s gotta hurt.”

Itachi nods. “Something must’ve happened between them around the same time. Because before they were…well they weren’t exactly friendly, but they existed in the same space, but then after that night Izuna started to avoid Kurama like the plague. He wouldn’t even say goodbye until Kurama chased him down across the ocean. I’m pretty sure that they share some sort of time-space seal that allows them to teleport to each other’s location.”

“That sounds…romantic.” Shisui fake swoons.

“Stop, you’re gonna mess up my piles,” Itachi kicks him until he moves away from his supplies. “I can’t believe I’m discussing someone’s love-life with you right now,” Itachi lets his disgust show a little and Shisui laughs at his discomfort.

“Any information is good information.”

“Then how about the fact that Izuna’s a kinkiller? Perhaps we should discuss that instead?”

Shisui sobers up immediately, his smile is practically ripped from his face. Itachi winces at his own lack of tact. “We need to talk to Izuna about it, but how the hell are we supposed to bring it up?”

There’s no good way, they’ll just have to take the plunge. Itachi opens his mouth to say as much, but then it gets caught there.

Somewhere, off on the side of a river, a crow explodes.

And hell breaks loose across his mind.

The next thing he knows he’s retching over the other side of the tree’s roots, Shisui's panicked voice calling through his haze of memories. Tears rise and fall unbridled, endless, fogging up his brain, clogging his nose, closing off the airways to his lungs until he’s gasping.

His eyes are wide open, staring off into the memories that flow like a river through his head. He can’t even see it when Shisui steps in front of him and holds his face. He barely notices the way Shisui’s own sharingan spins and spins, concerned, wild, *frightened.*

But more than anything, Itachi feels guilty. It rips through his chest, burns out his lungs, fills his entire body with the sense of uncomfortable prickles, blood on his hands that he can’t scrape out, it leaks from his eyes and drips down his face, and runs into the corners of his open and gasping mouth. No matter how much he wipes away the blood down his face, it still runs.

He’s going to drown in it.

I’m the one they should call kinkiller. I’m the one who causes Sasuke the most pain. I’m the one who failed him. It’s me. The problem is me. I killed them. I killed my mother. I killed my father. I killed children. I killed them. I killed them. I-

“Itachi, your eyes-” Shisui starts. Itachi stands up and turns away from him. He can’t bear to look at him, not when he sees Shisui falling, his arm outstretched as if to catch him. He darts off into the forest, honing in on the last location of his crow.

“Itachi!” Shisui runs after him until he turns himself into a flock of crows and scatters.

And there, off into the darkness between the trees he lets himself cry freely for just a moment, lets a hoarse sound tear out of his throat, lets himself stop and hunch over and empty out whatever is left. He can smell blood. He can hear Sasuke wailing, crying at him to stop but he doesn’t stop. *Why didn’t I stop?*

More than anything, he needs to find Sasuke. He needs to know if all of this is real— *as if you don’t know already. You’re calling Izuna ‘Sasuke’ now—* he just needs to see him with his own eyes, confirm it once and for all. But his vision swims. Black speckles fly in and out. His head feels about ready to split open, his heart beats too fast, his lungs haven’t been getting enough air for minutes now. He leans against the side of another tree trunk and presses the heels on his hands into his eyes. The pressure keeps his brain from feeling like it’s about the leak out of his eyes, but it does nothing to quell the onslaught of crystal clear images flashing through his mind.

There’s so much death that his hands cause. Why didn’t he notice it sooner? His legs nearly give out on him the second he tries to take a step. He still keeps his eye screwed shut, his hands are covered in the blood that still wells up behind his eyelids. He’s about to force himself to move when two, achingly familiar chakra signatures drop down near him.

“Itachi,” *Sasuke* says, older and colder but there’s no doubt about it that it’s his brother talking to him. Itachi pulls his hands away, blinks up through the fuzziness and blood still swamping his vision. “I shouldn’t have shown you that.”

He barely has a chance to focus his eyes when Sasuke pokes his forehead for the second time that night and it sends Itachi’s heart crumbling into tiny pieces because *this is real. This is Sasuke.*

And Itachi can’t tell if its a mockery of his own words or if that’s sincerity written across Sasuke’s tired face but it doesn’t really matter because either way it's more than Itachi will ever deserve when he says, “Forgive me, Itachi.”

Chapter End Notes

Ooooohohohhooo. There were a couple of comments just begging for Izuna/sasuke to tap Itachi's forhead and there were some others begging for him to show Itachi the massacre so I present to you....BOTH! HAHAHA

Oh yeah, I actually passed all my classes this semester, which is a first!! good luck to anyone still doing finals and exams!!

Consequences be Damned

Chapter Notes

> Ahh I'm back! Un-betaed like usual but for some reason I'm extra nervous its some how incomprehensible lmao?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuna does the only thing he can think to do at that moment. He pulls Itachi to him and holds him tight. Itachi practically squeezes the life out of him as he cries absolutely silently against his chest. Even in this situation, his composure is unmatched. He's fucking sobbing but there's barely any indication once his blood-streaked face is hidden in the black folds of Izuna's cloak. Itachi's just short enough that Izuna can practically tuck him under his chin, and if that isn't a strange thought, he doesn't know what is. Itachi was always so much taller than him. But now, he fits so perfectly. As if it's Izuna's job to hug him and protect him instead.

Like I'm *the older brother now…*

He spots Kakashi staring at them, silent and questioning, from over Itachi's shoulder.

"What happened with the crow?" Kakashi whispers, as if Itachi couldn't hear them. He makes no move to pull away though. He clings to Izuna like a lifeline. Izuna can feel blood and tears dampening the front of his shirt through his cloak. Very faintly, Itachi is shaking.

"His crow went snooping in my head and found out exactly what happened to my family." Which is the truth in its entirety, just missing some context. The smugness Izuna usually feels with his half truths doesn't come. Infact, there's no emotion behind his words or in his thoughts. His head is particularly empty. Too much has happened in too little time, and Izuna hasn't slept properly for two days.

Kakashi's eyebrows shoot up. Even through his mask, Izuna can clearly see him mouth an *'oh shit.'* He rightfully remains silent after that.

"Itachi-" Izuna starts. He gets nails digging into his shoulders for the effort. "Itachi you should turn off your eyes." Mechanical. Izuna wants to hate himself for saying something so disgustingly bland, but he can't even muster that right now.

"I'm *sorry,"* Itachi all but hisses, muffled and choked. "I'm a terrible fucking person and I'm-" He stops. Even like this, Itachi knows not to go on. He understands everything all too well and he's so *willing* to sacrifice his own wellbeing for Sasuke even now. Because there's no way in hell another person is going to learn who Izuna really is tonight.

Izuna bites the inside of his cheek. “It’s…” It’s a lot of things. *It wasn’t you. It’s not your fault.* “It’s okay.”

“Is he gonna be alright?” Kakashi asks, tentatively, standing there awkwardly as if he doesn’t know where to place himself anymore. “I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen him like this-”

“Yeah, there’s a reason for that,” Izuna mutters. His deadpan is enough to keep Kakashi at bay. “He probably doesn’t want people to see him like this either.”

“I deserve this-”

“Shut up,” Izuna cuts him off before *that* can begin. Then, since it’s been too long, he pulls Itachi away from him just enough so he can see his eyes. He’s vaguely aware of Kakashi hovering, but he keeps Itachi’s back to his curiosity. Kakashi’s too much of an awkward person to try and get any closer. It’s the only thing saving him from an incredibly long explanation or a distasteful decision.

I should just wipe his memory and be done with this. “Is Shisui looking for you?” He stares hard at Itachi; *Did Shisui see your eyes?*

Itachi’s eyes take a second to focus on him again. When they do, a fresh wave of blood and tears rushes forth. *Fuck.* Itachi nods once. *Am I going to have to erase Shisui’s memories too? This is getting a little…can I even erase memories like this? What will happen to his Mangekyo?*

“Kakashi,” Izuna looks up at him, Kakashi freezes like he’s been caught red handed. Izuna’s aware he sounds frigid. He’s aware his voice is a flat plane of nothingness.

“Shisui ran off in the wrong direction. With the fake-Madara still lurking around, someone should go look for him.”

Kakashi clearly understands what he wants. He’s also still not too keen on leaving him alone. “I’ll…I don’t think I should-”

To both of their surprise Itachi is the one who snaps. “Leave, Kakashi. Izuna’s not the threat.”

Kakashi eyes them both for another second. “You know I’ll have to tell Jiraiya about this, right?”

“Go ahead,” Izuna says, as much as a dismissal as anything, and then, because he’s *learning,* and he sees the quick flash of something self loathing in Kakashi’s eye as he leaves, he tacks on a “Thank you, Kakashi.”

“Maa, that’s rare of you,” Kakashi seems quite pleased with himself as he disappears into the forest. Izuna watches him go. He flares out his chakra to try and sense any tricks or summons.

After a while, Itachi finally sniffs, his face still squished into Izuna’s chest, his voice muffled and far off. And yet those bastard words cut a cold knife through Izuna’s back. “You know

he's in love with you, right?"

"Shut your fucking mouth, you're delusional right now." He does not hesitate. He *really* can't even begin to process that right now, but now that it's been said, it fills up his brain. Curse this…brat.

"But seriously… *Kakashi* of all people-" Itachi mutters, Izuna can *hear* the snarl. Izuna pulls him back fully, much to Itachi's protest and he glares down at this little *menace.* All his annoyance bleeds off him when he sees the absolute despair that's paired with the most depressed smile he's seen in a while. The grin falls flat as Itachi is once again swamped by memories that aren't even his yet—no, they'll *never* be his, not truly anyway.

"Itachi, you need to listen to me. Think about something else. You're putting too much strain on your eyes right now."

Itachi shakes his head. "I could go blind and I'll still only see *that-"* He spits the last words. Itachi starts to tilt his head up, too look at him, then changes his mind. His gaze wanders over to nothing. "Sasuke-"

Izuna shakes head. "Izuna. My name is *Izuna."* Itachi opens his mouth, about to protest, but Izuna keeps going. "Do you want to forget it all?" *If I take the memories away, would it be as if his mangekyo never happened?*

But Itachi just stare off nowhere, the line of his mouth turning into a heavy frown, bitter along the corners and in the wrinkles of his nose. "I don't deserve to forget-"

"But do you *want* to?" Izuna's patience is running on the thinnest wire. He grips Itachi by the shoulders and gets right at his eye level and the boy still refuses to look. "I can make it like this never happened. You'll forget about the massacre. You'll forget that some…future version of you did this. You'll forget that you hurt Sasuke."

"Then I'd forget that *you're* Sasuke," Itachi hisses, "Do you know how *horrible* it's been chasing your shadow around?" The Mangekyo starts to spin, "I should have *known.* I think I did know. I knew you were Sasuke from the second I saw you and yet…and yet I couldn't allow you to *be* Sasuke. Because you're…you're-"

"An awful person?"

"No!" Itachi shakes his head vehemently. "That's not it! You're just…you're everything I never wanted for Sasuke—I failed you."

"You haven't done anything," Izuna snaps at him. "You didn't do this, so why should you carry the weight of the guilt? It wasn't *you."*

The evil sliver in his soul, the one that has reared its vengeful, ugly head since Naruto's death, revels in Itachi's torment, no matter how small and kind this version is. He kills that line of thought before it gets any worse. Hatred is exhausting.

Itachi covers his eyes once more as they start to spin faster and faster. “But it *will* be me.” Izuna takes Itachi’s hands and pry them away so he can act a bit faster if anything bad happens. Itachi doesn’t fight him, but he leans his face away as if the few extra inches between them would make a difference.

“Turn off your eyes, Itachi. Think about something happy.”

“How could I ever think of anything happy after what I did?”

“Think about something less sad then.”

“It’s all about Sasuke anyway.” Itachi starts to mumble, his gaze drifts away from Izuna. “And I murdered my entire clan just so I could save you…and I couldn’t even do that…I lead you down a dark path-”

“Itachi if you keep your eyes activated like this, you’re gonna end up hurting yourself.”

Itachi’s eyes widen a fraction, “So be it.”

Izuna clicks his tongue. The thin wire of his patience snaps. He lets his sharingan spin and Itachi actually, legitimately, flinches away from him like he’s been struck. “Look at me.”

“No.”

“Itachi, I swear I’m going to put you to sleep so you can rest-”

“If I close my eyes I’ll just see them anyway!”

Has he always been this much of a child? “I’ll make it so you won’t,” Izuna tries. Itachi doesn’t budge. Izuna sighs. “Trust me?”

I should do it. I should take away these memories. They're not good for him, clearly. But….I’d have to remove him figuring out who I am as well. And Itachi already said he didn’t want to forget.

Itachi looks at him. “Okay.”

The next second Itachi is out cold. Izuna lays him gently on the ground before wiping away the blood under his eyes.. With them closed and his face lax, he looks deceptively young. Izuna traces the stress lines down his cheeks and frowns. These got so much worse by the time he’d died.

After cleaning his face, Izuna sighs deeply, muttering a “ *what the fuck is happening.”* under his breath.

Of all the times Itachi could pull out the rug from under him and it has to be the exact moment he was thinking about the massacre. Then again, he’d been goading Itachi the entire time, baiting him into thinking Sasuke’s memories were his own by strategically placing one with both of them together. And the memory that Itachi found himself in *wasn’t* originally his. It was Itachi’s from when he got his eyes implanted.

“ITACHI!” Shisui comes flying out of the tree tops in a blur of scattered leaves and nearly rolls Izuna right over from where he’s crouched. There’s a deadly array of kunai pointed at his throat before he can move, “What the hell did you do to him?!”

Izuna scowls. He’s sick of this bullshit. “I didn’t do anything. He freaked, so I put him under so he could rest.” Shisui hesitates, but the weapons don’t lower. Izuna lets his eyes roll. “You saw his eyes, didn’t you?”

“What the hell happened though. What did you *do?”*

“I didn’t *do* anything! He looked into my memories. That’s on him!” Izuna snaps, Shisui all but growls at him. Izuna’s had enough of this. He scoops Itachi up and sneers at Shisui. “I’ve had enough of today. Lets just…go back and when Itachi wakes up you can ask him all the questions you want.” Izuna looks around when he can’t spot any silver around. “Where’s Kakashi?”

“He went and told Jiraiya,” Shisui mutters, “Not like that’ll do us much good in getting information outta you, seeming as he’s just as squirmy about questions.”

“Like I said, you can ask Itachi *later.* I want to fucking *sleep.”* Izuna whirls around and starts the trudge back to camp. Shisui doesn’t leave his side for a second. He flits around like a squirmy bird, and he doesn’t shut up. Izuna ends up tuning him out completely by the time they’re back. The remaining Anbu watch him as silent as the grave as he takes Itachi’s limp form into his and Shisui’s tent. He lays his brother down carefully, and that’s all the time he gets. Shisui whirls on him again, hovering protectively over Itachi’s body like Izuna will finally snap and decide to hurt them.

Instead, Izuna turns his back on the pair and leaves without another word. Surprisingly—or maybe it’s not surprising at all—Shisui yells after him. “Where the hell are you *going?”*

“It’s clear I’m not welcome here,” Izuna says, maybe a trace of bitterness finally breaking through, “So I’m going to go seclude myself in some desolate corner. Anyway from you and those eyes of yours.” He looks over his shoulder at Shisui’s Sharingan that should frighten him more than it does. He can’t tell what sort of nonsense he feels when he sees him like that. When he sees both of them staring at him like he’s the end of their world as they understand it. Izuna gets it though. He’s from the other side. Even if Shisui doesn’t have all the facts, people aren’t the sum of their histories or the names written in them. There’s something else to them, and that *thing* in Izuna screams *different.*

“Y’know…Your open hostility towards me is understandable, but hatred is exhausting,” He says. And then he leaves.

* * *

Izuna sleeps in a tree that night.

He's woken up by birdsong, and bright, cold sunlight piercing through his eyelids. He wakes slowly, then all at once as a frost-bitten wind blows right through his cloak and causes him to shudder. He gets a brief second of reprieve from the hectic nature of existence, when his eyes peel open to golden leaves barely hanging onto frost-tipped branches. And the bluest sky he's ever seen. Blue and gold…he scoffs to himself.

And then he hears the commotion of a camp being dismantled, and he angles his head down to watch as the Konoha-nin pack up their things for the day's travel. Itachi comes crawling out of his and Shisui's tent blurry eyed and asking questions. He gets hounded immediately by everyone awake, but Itachi ignores them in favor of looking around.

Looking for Izuna.

He won't find him that easily though. Izuna stays where he is, hands drifting over the faint seals he's etched into the wood last night.

He's close enough that he can hear the faint questions being asked; the "where's Izuna?" and "what happened?" and the "You tell me." He can sense the distress and disappointment rolling off Itachi in waves. But Izuna's not exactly ready to talk about all of that in detail with his brother just yet.

He wants to come up with a better plan, a way to incorporate Itachi into the discussion he already had with Jiraiya so they can figure out exactly how to convince the Hokage to let him hang around without immediately probing his mind and memories. It's not going to happen. Izuna already expressed that if it *were* to happen, he'd react on a self-preservation impulse.

Which means he'll start a fight Konoha can't win. And with Kurama just a chakra-pull away…the effects could be less than pleasant.

Izuna doesn't want to resort to that line of thinking, but he will if he's pushed far enough. And he's walking on the cliffside of oblivion.

So Konoha packs their things. Izuna observes them, removed, and when they start to move, Itachi *really* starts to look for him in a near-frantic state. Or, as frantic as Itachi *can* be. To anyone else he's just a little quicker on his feet, a little more observant when a branch snaps or a leaf swirls.

"Alright! Two more days and we'll be at Konoha's walls." Jiraiya claps his hands together, rounding up their scattered attention. "We'll only be stopping one more time on this journey, got it?"

A disheartened chorus of agreement follows.

Then a chorus of complaints to Izuna's whereabouts, all of which Jiraiya silences and assures them that "if that brat wants to follow us, he will."

"What!? We can't just let someone that dangerous out of our sights!"

"He's got a lot to answer for after what happened last night."

“What if he’s run off and joined that masked guy?”

Izuna is content to let them speculate, chances of survival be damned. Who is he kidding? He’s terrified to go down there and fumble his way through an explanation. And Itachi will no doubtedly come to his rescue regardless of how batshit insane he sounds, consequences be damned.

Speaking of which…”Izuna has a lot of useful information. If we want him to share it with us, then we also have to prove that we can be trusted,” Itachi tries to reason with them.

“He could kill us and be done with it,” the anbu with a beetle face speaks up, “or he could have us lead him directly to the Hokage and kill him, and level the entire village while he’s at it. Why did we even allow him to travel with us? He’s the one the masked man was after. He’s the reason Owl died.”

“Thinking like that will get us nowhere,” Jiraiya says, “we’ve all got targets on our backs. Half of us are in one bingo book or another. It could have been any bounty hunter looking to collect on any of us. It just so happened they were after Izuna.”

“Izuna painted that target himself.” Beetle face mutters.

Jiraiya levels the anbu with a stare. “So do we all. When we kill one problem, two more come chasing after us. That is the nature of the shinobi world, isn’t it?”

There’s some grumbling, but no one tries to argue with the truth of his statement.

And thus, Izuna allows himself to be seen.

Kakashi’s head snaps to him right away, with Itachi’s not a half second later, and Shisui follows his line of sight to him and bristles like an angry cat. The rest of the anbu catch wind and the air prickles with their unease. Izuna keeps his face passive and cold, not wanting to spark any more animosity than there already is. But he makes no move to get down. Itachi, at least, calms down a fraction. Kakashi makes a move to go to him, then seems to reconsider and sticks with the group.

That’s how they travel the rest of the day, with a set space between him and the rest of them, a comfortable distance that The sharingan crew so desperately wish to breach. But when they start to lag behind the group, their gaze set on Izuna’s whereabouts in the shadows of some tree, he also slows his pace. He maintains the distance.

At some point, Kakashi signs him something Izuna probably shouldn’t know, a quick glance and a *“You” “Okay?”* Izuna should tilt his head in confusion. He shouldn’t be so privy to Konoha’s signaling. But Sasuke knows them, had them drilled into him from a young age and used them far too often in the war. So Izuna takes a second to respond with his own, *“okay”* and that seems to halt Kakashi’s attempts to speak to him for a while.

And then Itachi tries it too. Only he uses the same code he uses for Shisui, the same code Sasuke has seen fly back and forth between brother and cousin, those same signs that Itachi never taught him, but he knows those too. Itachi’s eyes and all. He has memories of learning

that secret set of code. Memories that aren't even his to begin with, imprints of Itachi's vision over his own, and his rinnegan can easily pick apart the rest.

So when Itachi signs *"Tomato" "Hurt" "Moon"* then points at his eye, he knows he's asking, *"Sasuke, what happened after you put me out last night?"*

And Izuna returns with a shoulder lift, causing Itachi's face to scowl behind that mask of his, clearly not the answer he's expecting. But then Izuna decides to one up him by pointing at his own eye and signing, *"Red" "Four" "Hurt" "Crow"* then he tilts his head to indicate a question; *"Itachi, does your mangekyo hurt?"*

Itachi shakes his head, signs, *"Okay."*

"Why do you *know* that?" Shisui breaks it up, nearly shouts at them from across the path they're wandering down, then in rapid succession, *"moon" "red" "four" "Crow,"* taps his knuckles on his head then tilts it.

Izuna waves his hand flippantly, then *"gray."* He fights back an evil grin when Shisui huffs, rolls his eyes again, points at him, and draws a line over his throat. No one needs to know their codes to understand what that means. Though Shisui says it in a non-serious manner. He's starting to see Izuna as a part of them, it seems.

But then he spots Jiraiya further down the line of their little traveling pack, and Jiraiya makes a very clear, very distinct, very Konoha sign of *"Tonight" "Meet"*

How discreet of him. Izuna sighs ruefully as the rest of the anbu swivel their heads around to look at him.

They break for camp that night. This time, Izuna doesn't fuck around, and he goes off on his own and sets up the most extensive barriers he can feasibly manage, just shy of permanent fissures in the stones that could theoretically contain a bijuu and ward away an army of angry zetsu's. He makes sure to dig his hands down and plant bombs under the ground at least ten feet deep, and nearly asks Kakashi to go even further down with his head hunting jutsu…just to make sure that aloe-vera rat can't slip through his defenses.

But Izuna's not too keen on actually talking to Kakashi right now. Especially with what Itachi said earlier. Things are horrible tense, regardless of what kind of tension. Izuna doesn't care. It's all bad.

But once Jiraiya disappears into his little tent, and Shisui starts a proper fire for the night, Izuna melts himself out of his hiding and yanks on Itachi's ponytail for good measure.

"That's wholly unnecessary," Itachi mumbles as he straightened himself out again, "I was going to go look for you if you didn't speak to us soon."

"Well, you're in luck. Come with me." Izuna doesn't wait for a reply, he walks towards the tent, hears Itachi shuffle behind him, fall into step, and when he peers curiously down at his brother, he sees shiny black eyes staring up at him with curiosity, wonder, amazement…and fear.

“Shisui’s going to figure it out soon, if you keep acting like this.”

“Like what?” Izuna turns forward, taps his knuckles on the flap of Jiraiya’s tent.

“Why *do* you know our code anyway? Did I really teach it to you?”

Izuna bites down on the inside of his cheek. He studies Itachi for a second, evaluating, calculating. From within the tent, Jiraiya tells them they can enter.

He throws all his calculations out the window. *Fuck it.* “When you saw what happened, whose perspective was it in?” Izuna doesn’t wait for a reply. He steps inside as Itachi stands there, frozen, and Izuna turns just to point to his eye and sign, *“Red” “Four” “Crow”*

“They’re your eyes.”

With that, he turns around again and greets Jiraiya with a short ‘hn.’

“Alright, let’s get this over with, Uchiha bastard-” Jiraiya peers over his shoulder at Itachi, still standing on the threshold, staring at the back of Izuna’s head. “-what’s wrong with him?”

Izuna reaches out and tugs him inside, bullies Itachi to sit down next to him, then zips up the tent flap, effectively cutting them off from the rest of the world. And more importantly, the ears of said world. “Itachi knows,” Izuna says before Jiraiya can ask.

His old eyes widen a fraction, eyebrows ticking up. Then he chuckles as if this is all very amusing. “Ah! So you did take my advice!”

Last night, their parting words went a little like Jiraiya trying to get him to find people he trusts and Izuna immediately snapping that there’s no one he can *really* trust. He scowls deeply at the thought of Jiraiya getting a one-up on him in any way, so he pettily reveals the truth of what happened. How Itachi’s crow invaded his mind thanks to his own stupid goading, and got himself his very own Mangekyo. At the mention of his new eyes, Jiraiya’s posture straightens up out of his leisurely slouch.

“Should that even be possible? To get eyes like that from memories that aren’t even your own?”

“They are mine.” Itachi says, much more sure about it than his whimpering last night. “Sasuke’s eyes are…they’re mine. From the future. It’s all happening out of order right now. But I saw what happened through my own two eyes. And it’s not like I can separate the guilt of what has happened to what…what *will* happen. The guilt of what I did to Sasuke…that’s real. That’s something I’ll never atone for-”

“Stop it,” Izuna cuts him off. “My name is *Izuna,* first of all. Sasuke is a little kid. Sasuke is innocent. His hands are clean, his head is clear from all this mess. And…” He thinks about little Naruto. He thinks about Kurama. His desire to protect his siblings, their jinchuuriki, and his family. Izuna thinks it’s like that. He remembers the vivid feeling of Kurama’s chakra running under his skin, a living current of that power.

A fire. All consuming in its nature, the warmth of a hearth, the roar of a flame, something that you need to be near in order to feel its strength. Itachi's love on the other hand…maybe a slap of harsh reality, a brutal coldness, something that needed to be there. Something that allowed Sasuke to survive. But not to let him live.

"...and you will do everything in your power and *knowledge* to keep it that way." He levels Itachi with a stare, tries within an instant to instill it all into his brother, to make him understand without tricks or chakra or anything but just his face, just his stony disposition, everything that Sasuke wants from him.

It's not some silent protector. It's not a distant figure. A shadow of a man. A goal. Sasuke doesn't want any of that.

He wants a brother and nothing more.

Itachi, for what Izuna's thoughts are worth, must struggle with always being *more.* So Izuna catches him up on a couple of details of Sasuke's life—of his life—until he becomes Izuna. Itachi learns about who everyone is to him. He learns about Kakashi sensei, Orochimaru, and the importance of Naruto in his life. He learns more than he should ever learn about Sasuke, more than he'll ever need to know. But Izuna can't stop once the words start.

There are shocked gasps and skeptical looks. But mostly, Itachi listens and absorbs it all like a sponge, tries to school his expression into something resembling neutral. When Izuna's voice cracks in his recounting of Uzushio and he stops entirely, Itachi tells him it's enough.

"I think I understand enough to know why you're here. So tell me what you need…Izuna."

Izuna inhales deeply, and exhales just as slowly. He looks at Jiraiya, who has been uncharacteristically silent this whole time, but now the sage springs back into his usual vigor.

"What we need is for Izuna's brain to remain completely intact, and without any pesky Yamanaka trying to figure out who he really is."

Itachi looks between the two of them, blinking slowly. "You know that's highly unlikely though, right? It would be easier if he uses a genjutsu at the same time instead of avoiding it all together. Or just…" Itachi eyes Izuna's rinnegan carefully. "You've been able to pick out certain memories to show me…but then again, the risks involved would be…less than ideal."

"Yeah kid, now you're gettin' it. If there's even one Hyuuga present, then he's done for. And that's *if* they don't blindfold him on the spot."

"Then you'd suggest that I do it?"

Jiraiya's eyebrows shoot to the sky. "Are you…the consequences of you being caught are far greater than Izuna's."

Itachi scowls subtly, he glances at Izuna from the corner of his eye before returning to Jiraiya. “So sharingan is out of the question.”

“It’s always good for a contingency plan. But what we’re focusing on is avoiding the whole situation together.”

Itachi blinks once. “Genjutsu the entire room before we enter-”

“Kid…no.”

“Seals?”

“No.”

“Rinnegan?”

Jiraiya tilts his head, thinking. Then he looks at Izuna, whole shrugs. “Rinnegan isn’t exactly the mind-manipulating type of dojutsu.”

“What exactly *can* it do?” Jiraiya questions, leaning forward. He’s got his journal in one hand and his pen in the other.

Izuna gives him a withering glare. “Nothing that will remedy this situation, but a thousand different ways for me to run from it.” Jiraiya and Itachi both huff in annoyance at his avoidance. Itachi gets over it pretty quickly though. “And you’re thinking about this all wrong.”

“There’s not many other ways to think about it,” Itachi mutters. “If you’re going to be a konoha shinobi, they’ll pick your brain. That’s standard protocol, not to mention all of the rumors already circulating, whatever Shisui and his squad will report about you, and your involvement with kidnapping Naruto-” Itachi reads his indignation before he had a word out “- *regardless* of the reason, you’ve slighted Konoha already. It’ll make the Hokage, the elders, and the clan heads all wary of you and your power.”

“Exactly,” Izuna says. “I’m powerful. Konoha can’t do much against that, try as they might.” Izuna’s mouth twitches. It’s been a while since he’s bragged so…openly before. Something dark curls around his heart, but he shoves it away.

“Power isn’t everything. You’re gonna build this relationship with Konoha based on fear?”

“No,” Izuna says, “you’re assuming too much, little brother,” The word slips out, surprising everyone, Itachi’s mouth falls open. Izuna continues on as if nothing happened. “All this is assuming I’ll become a Konoha shinobi, as you said. But…what if I didn’t?”

Itachi stills. His face becomes a passive mask, but in his eyes Izuna sees a storm of raging confusion and grief. He tries not to feel so guilty about it. About how Itachi understands what he’s getting at all too easily. He’s not coming home. Not really. Not even if he stays in the village, he won’t be a part of it like Itachi hopes.

Not like Konoha has ever felt like his home after all the things that have happened.

Home to Izuna feels like…Broken windows. Dusty scrolls piled high. Wind smelling like salt and sand.

Naruto.

“Ah! That’s a great idea actually!” Jiraiya, acting oblivious to the sudden tension rising, cuts it like a knife with his off kilter cheer, “I have a plan. All you have to do is say exactly what I tell you, okay?”

Chapter End Notes

Dang I was reallllly in one of those author moods where I couldn't, for the life of me, come up with any good way to wrap up this little mini-arc, so we're just diving in and forgetting about a lot of important things along the way. I think it's okay though. Itachi's on mission-mode still, he can't have his big epic break-down (part two) yet, and Shisui is still utterly and incomprehensibly left in the dark. I definitely want to touch on Shisui a bit more but I just couldn't fit it all in this chapter with everything else that's happening! And there's more important things in Izuna's mind right now.

annnnd real life stuff...I've got nothing y'all, summer is a blast, I've absolutely killed my sleep schedule and drink like 30 oz of coffee a day. my roommate went back to her moms house for the summer so I'm here most of the time alone but omg sometimes she'll come back for a day and she'll just look at me and go 'the mental illness' then ask me if ive eaten anything and perhaps if I'll go outside? the answer is no to both of that. So yes, the mental illness is strong lol

Of Men Playing Kings

Chapter Notes

> Welp. I'm back lmao, unexpected hiatus because I decided to focus on some other things, and that kind of consumed all my creative power! But! Enjoy!!!!
>
> Also, I HAVE read all the comments over these past few months. I've totally been lurking around, so again, even if I don't respond to your comment, I have read it, and I appreciate all of you so fuckin much. Most of the time its hard for me to find words that feel substantial enough to convey the gratitude that I feel towards some of these comments. It doesn't matter if you write paragraphs or just emojis, I fucking love it. I'm so glad y'all like this fic and that I get to share this stupid story and my stupid art with so many of you, and that I even get to tell little bits and pieces of my life. Thank you for reading. (No this isn't the end I'm just feeling sappy after my impromptu hiatus)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Konoha is quiet. Cool. The leaves swirl more frantically, colored brown and dull yellow. Some mornings it's dry and frigid, some are filled with frosty dew, a layer of misty white over bluish grass and crispy leaves that turn to mush under the autumn sun. Bustling streets turn quieter. Classrooms become less rowdy as kids fall ill and flit about. Attendance is spotty, both there and everywhere else.

There’s a chill.

And then there’s Sasuke. A coldness creeping into his heart and his limbs burning with a restlessness he can’t quell. It’s only been a few weeks since Itachi and Shisui…and Naruto all vanished into thin air, nothing a shinobi shouldn’t be able to handle, which also means it's been a few weeks since Sasuke’s been absolutely miserable. No one tells him what’s going on but he can feel it. He feels it like the cold. Itching tension under his skin. The way his father storms around can’t be missed, nor any of the older Uchiha who gather in the crevices between their houses and mutter things under their breath.

They always clam up when Sasuke comes around. They smile at him and it doesn’t reach their red eyes. Sasuke knows it’s because he’s too young. They think he won’t understand. They think he’s too much of a kid to have any say in things.

They’re kind of right, which Sasuke will vehemently deny to his last breath.

But he feels this coldness, far deeper than the wind through his hair or the frigid stare of his father as he talks in low voices about the Hokage, or even the hushed whispered, frantic tone of his mother. It’s more than that.

Sasuke thinks he’s going insane.

He practices his fireball jutsu twice as hard, if only to warm up his heart a bit more. He still feels that tug in his cells that drive him somewhere over the sunrise. When he shuts his eyes and dreams, he sees a black fox with a scroll between fanged teeth. He sees storms swirling over waves, and lightning splitting open clouds. He sees fire and ashes and the burnt shells of old buildings.

A broken window?

Sasuke's too young to know what it all means. And every time he tells his mother she smiles at him carefully and smooths the bedhead from his hair. She talks to him quietly, asks more about that blond idiot named Naruto, of which Sasuke gets testy, snaps that Naruto's not that important anyway. Not when Itachi and Shisui are still away on whatever mission they'd been assigned, and the crows have slowed down to a halt, and that Itachi could be *dead* for all Sasuke knows, *for all they'll tell me, that is!* And so why should Naruto, of all the people Sasuke's aware of, be relevant in any way?

And if he thinks for a second too long about that strange kid, about his sad blue eyes and his goofy grin, he'll really go insane! Because Naruto occupies too much space already in his mind and he barely knows the kid! It's infuriating, to say the least.

He's too young to know what it all means. He's too young to know what's happening.

But he's not too young to do something stupid about it. Especially when no one is there to explain it to him otherwise. No. Sasuke will take matters into his own hands if he has to, regardless of outcome. He can't sit there in that academy classroom any longer, watching Sai pretend to fail his tests so he'll be left alone, watching Kiba make stupid jokes and listening to the bickering between the girls over who gets the spot next to him—he's sick of it.

He's sick of the icy patches on the sidewalk that freeze in the morning and melt by the time he's walking home alone. He's sick of the *drip drip drip* of the leaky pipes in the old buildings on the market street. He's sick of the creak of his bedroom door and the wind chimes that sing lifelessly outside his house. He's sick of his mother's fake smile and his father's gloom.

He doesn't understand why everything is so lifeless around Konoha. Only that the sun rises in the east, basks his window in a reddish glow and seeps into his skin. He knows that for a moment he can feel warm again, and that there's something over there that he *needs.*

So Sasuke decides to go.

Or. He tries.

Again.

And Again.

Caught and returned until the border patrol is made aware of him, so much so that there's a trail of porcelain masks shadowing his steps. Sasuke can feel them too. Little pin pricks in his back. They don't do anything unless he takes a single step outside the Konoha walls. They

don't even try to interfere with his escape attempts until it gets serious, until he's actually full on sprinting through the main gates at high noon and dashing down the trampled paths, spitting at them and cursing as if that'll slow them down.

Sasuke never makes it more than ten feet.

Not even when he figures out how to make clones. They take up too much chakra and they never last long, bursting into smoke before Sasuke can get a real head start. How did Naruto manage to avoid Iruka sensei for so long? How did *he* disappear and yet Sasuke, the top of his class, can't make it past the gates without getting hounded?

How did Naruto slip through the cracks?

Sasuke's left to scheming and planning his escape routes. He doodles maps into his notes instead of listening to lessons. He trains his feet to fall silently, practices walking around his old creaky house in the dead of night and listening for his parents to wake. He tries to dig through old files out of his clearance level—let alone *reading* level—in the records library. Much to his dismay, his previous escape attempts are all the desk chunin talk about between their breaks. To say that he's now the *Infamous Uchiha Escapee* is an understatement.

And its during one of these rampant escape attempts that he catches wind of something *strange* happening.

He feels it like he feels the wind, or the burning desire to face the sun when it shines. But one second he's staring out at the Konoha gates, wistful to go beyond the walls and see what's been calling him out there, and the next he's staring at a stark black figure, a silhouette looked dragged out from some other place.

Sasuke sits up straighter just seeing the strange man, who comes with his own entourage of Anbu. And *there.* Sasuke's heart leaps into his throat when he spots his brother's familiar crow mask, and Shisui's cat right next to him. They're solely preoccupied with the man that looks cut out from the mythology books Sasuke used to love, draped in a rippling black cloak and black hair and black shoes, Sasuke can't help but stare at the figure.

He feels…familiar.

And so. So cold.

"Alright, that's it-" A voice says behind him. Sasuke barely has time to whip around to see another porcelain face—a red-eared cat he's grown quite familiar with—before he's being lifted by his shirt collar and tossed over a shoulder.

"Fucking bastard!" Sasuke swears loudly, "Put me down asshole! That's my brother over there!" He pounds his fists on the Anbu's back.

"Sasuke?" He hears Itachi call, and looks up to see Itachi's mask looking right at him. "What are you-"

"Nii-san help me!" He cries.

“Oh, none of that, brat,” The Anbu hisses, only half amused, “time to go back home now.” The Anbu body-flickers then in a swirl of leaves, just as he hears Itachi start to speak.

He’s dumped at his doorstep with little fanfare and the Anbu is gone before he can whirl around and shoot fireballs at him. Sasuke hisses and curses the air where the porcelain face had been. In a rage he’s not sure is directed at any *thing* or *one,* he knocks the wind chimes to the ground and tries to light them on fire. It doesn’t work out.

“Sasuke!” The window next to the front door slams open and his mother sticks her head out. “What are you *doing?”*

Sasuke cowers immediately, stomping the tiny flames into dust. “Itachi and Shisui are back.” He mumbles into the dirt and windchimes.

His mother’s face brightens, a smile replaces her anger. “Oh! Were they okay? They didn’t have any injuries?”

“No, they looked fine…” Sasuke steps inside the house, sullen once again. He feels his father’s presence looming, somewhere in his study down the hall. “A bunch of people were with them. This old guy, this other guy with…silver hair…” He pauses when he thinks about the shadow, for some reason, the word of the stranger’s arrival refuses to leave his tongue. “I’ll…I’m going to my room!” He rushes away before he can be stopped.

His room is safe, at least, slightly warm. Facing east, towards the sunrise. He doesn’t understand what his obsession with the sun has come from, but he finds he follows it in circles on the days he has nothing better to do. Now, he slinks over to his window and throws it open, feels the chilly breeze on his face, lets it sting his nose and sink into his skin once again.

Itachi is back.

Perhaps it hasn’t registered yet, to Sasuke’s brain, the cold making it slow, making his heart still tick and twist precariously, because he’s still so…sad.

From his window he can see the front door. He can see the jonin who comes running up to their door, hears the sharp knocks twice, one inside and one out. He sees his mother answer, and hears the call for Fugaku through the threshold. Sasuke listens, waits with his breath held as his father storms his way out, converses shortly with the jonin. One sentence. Sasuke catches them as the jonin’s voice raises with enthusiasm.

“He’s here. The Uchiha Bounty Hunter everyone’s been talking about..”

And his father is gone in the blink of an eye. Sasuke sighs heavily, much too somber for a seven year old, slumps himself down on his elbows, rests his head on the sil of his window, hands dangling in the cold air. He thunks his forehead down on cool wood, thinking that Itachi didn’t even get to speak to him.

Somewhere above him, there’s the rumble of thunder and a flash of lightning. Sasuke can feel the air spiking, electricity raising the baby hairs on his arms and neck. He lifts his head, eyes

blurry, and watches the slow roll of storm clouds over Konoha.

Rain? Still? This close to winter? Isn't it cold enough that they'd get the soft fluffy white snow clouds? Not…not *these.* He squints up into the storm.

And the storm swirls down to meet him.

Sasuke gasps, a flash of lightning, a crash of thunder in his room. He backs from the window as a shadow passes through it, knocking books off their shelves, scattering scrolls and papers flying. Purple flickers of fire snuff out. There's an echo of mischievous laughter. He grins. Tails swish. Ears flick.

"You!" He cries, a swell of warmth scatters through his skin like sunshine. A happy squeal is returned to him. There's another scroll wedged between the fox's mouth, this one blue and gold, wave patterns, spirals and swirls. Sasuke's heart aches and he doesn't know why. The fox wiggles in place before it prances over to him, brushing its body just under Sasuke's hands, like it's begging to be pet.

Sasuke obliges. He runs his hands through its scruffy fur, silky ears flick under his finger tips. He reaches for those tails, and the fox lets him. It spins again to face him, its nose twitching curiously, head tilting, glassy eyes staring right to his soul. Sasuke holds his hand out. "Is that…for *me?"* He reaches for the scroll.

And the fox curls its lip. Sasuke's eyebrows dip. Hand hovering in the space between them. "No? Who's it for?" He pulls it back and the fox's maw relaxes. It chuckles around the scroll, grinning widely so Sasuke can see all its pearly teeth and hint of its pinkish tongue. "What's your name, fox?" Sasuke idles his mind by flattening down the raised tufts of fur on the fox's spine. "You're like Itachi-nii's crows, aren't you? You deliver messages?" Sasuke scoffs, "But you're pretty bad at it if you're just hanging out with me, *Crow."*

The fox's ears swivel. Sasuke marvels at it. "Is that your name? *Karasu?"* at that, the fox keens, its ears go flat and its paws scuffle on the floor. Sasuke giggles despite himself. "Well then, you can stay here until the storm passes." To punctuate his words, the clouds burst open and downpour with cold, icy rain. Sasuke gets up and shuts the window, even as Karasu whines. He turns around, "What? I'll let you out, don't worry. Will your master be mad if you're late by an hour or so?" Sasuke slinks over to the fox, but Karasu doesn't complain any longer. He jumps onto Sasuke's bed and curls up in a tight ball. He lets go of his precious scroll, tucks it tightly under his paws, claws flexing, then he yawns wide.

"Are you tired? How long have you been flying?" Sasuke asks as if he's expecting an answer. He gets a whine and a huff, and Karasu puts his head down over his paws, hiding the scroll completely from his view.

Sasuke's curious about it, of course. Why is there a two tailed messenger fox curled up in his bedroom? This fox that he's been seeing in his dreams, practically haunting him…he should be more afraid of it, surely?

But there's something so…familiar about the whole ordeal. It's just a silly fox afterall. Karasu clearly doesn't want to hurt him, even shuts his eyes and rests in Sasuke's presence.

Sasuke inches closer despite himself. He puts his knee up on the bed, Karasu flicks an eye open to watch him, but doesn't move an inch. Sasuke crawls up next to him, Karasu's tails wag, revealing that the fox doesn't mind in the slightest at all. Sasuke huffs a laugh at the strange creature, then he flops down next to Karasu, who turns to lay his snout on Sasuke's neck. A cold nose brushes against his skin.

he smiles, eyes drifting and suddenly weary. He forgets all about his intentions to worm the scroll from underneath those claws. Instead, Sasuke finds himself fighting off his own yawn. Today has already been exciting.

The storm clouds make his room a bit darker. Time slips away from him as he lies there, and he falls asleep with a fox's teeth a hair's breadth away from his throat.

* * *

Izuna decides he hates it here, standing stiffly in the middle of this stuffy office like he's on display. He's starting to think he's cursed. That rain will follow him everywhere he goes. He hears how it makes the onlookers whisper. The skies had been clear for days now. But the second Izuna arrives, clouds rolled over from the east and drenched the village in cold rain. Lightning splits open the darkening skies, flashing through the hokage's windows. Thunder booms not a second later, and rain pelts the grass, drums against the roof, drowns out the hum of electrical lights. Izuna can feel the lightning rippling under his skin.

He feels alive in the storm regardless.

They're waiting for the clan heads to arrive. For Fugaku to arrive. And Izuna has to stand there, stock still, not even allowing himself to shift his feet. Seven anbu are hidden among the shadows on the room, pressed up against bookcases, clinging to the corners of the ceiling and walls, in the rafters. Trained eyes on his back, on his front, trying to dissect him, pry out his soul with their stares alone. Izuna wears his cloak like armor, conceals as much of himself as he can, from the part of his hair to the black soles of his sandals, and it doesn't feel enough.

The Third Hokage sits with his hands steepled in front of him. White robes bleached by sunlight on his back. The red of his hat is the same shade that has haunted Izuna since forever. It follows him in the shape of eyes, clouds, moons, and foxes. The red of blood. The red of fire.

Izuna's not an idiot. Really. He can be a bit arrogant, in the wake of his power, but he's not stupid enough to underestimate the man who sits himself in that chair. He is arrogant enough to tilt his head up and look the Hokage in his eyes, regardless of the tension that zaps through the room as quick as his lightning. Aware of what he is, aware of all the damage he could cause with just a single glance.

But there's Hyuuga all around and no chance for a genjutsu to go unnoticed.

So he stares, he challenges this old man he's never had any particular fondness over. A man who sanctioned the slaughter of his clan, a man who claims to care for Konoha, and yet…and yet.

There's a picture of Naruto's father, the fourth Hokage, hanging on the wall. The man smiles like he doesn't mean it, all blue eyes and yellow hair. He looks nothing like Naruto.

The Hokage regards him with a furrowed brow, hands positioned in front of him to cover the rest of his face, and his hat tipped down to cover his head. Izuna can only see a sliver of his eyes that pierce right through him, like he's waiting for Izuna to make the first move. He won't, of course. He's not that stupid.

The Hokage's eye flit, skirt to his left for a millisecond and all of Izuna's muscles tense without his permission. "Ah, Fugaku, so good of you to join us."

Izuna refuses to let his jaw clench, refuses to let his hands curl from beneath his cloak. He refuses to acknowledge the lodge in his throat, or the sudden cold in his bones. He refuses to look, to take his eyes from The Hokage sat directly in front of him.

"So-" His father speaks, sounding so fucking forgien than the voice he has constructed in his head. But there's no doubt. That is what Fugaku Uchiha sounds like, *sounded* like, and Izuna made a mockery of his father's voice, distorted through his memory, "-this is what's causing all the ruckus."

There's slow footsteps, pounding to the time of his own heartbeat. Izuna refuses to turn his head, flick his eye across, even when he sees the ghost of his father move, a shadow in his peripherals.

Until he's there and Izuna sees him, with a frown heavy-set and permanent scowl to his features like all those days before, all the days he remembers of *before.* His father haunts his nightmares. He's seen him in perfect detail, dead on the floor, since he was 8 years old.

Izuna digs crescents into the palms of his hands, bites his tongue, and breathes as steady as he can.

The Hokage shuffles a short stack of papers in front of him, dropping his hands, letting Izzuna see his old, haggard features. "Now that you're here, Fugaku, we can begin."

Izuna nearly glaces at Jiraiya, perfectly imperfect in every way, feigning his nonchalance and ignorance better than Izuna ever could. Because Jiraiya's like that, right? He leans with his shoulder on the wall, chewing a long stem of grass he plucked just outside the gates, thumbing through one of his own manuscripts, and pretends like he doesn't give a rat's ass.

The Hokage turns to him. "So an Uchiha bounty hunter shows up out of the blue. What should we make of that?"

Izuna leans back on his heels, he lets his gaze travel this time. He looks first at the Hokage, then shifts, lands on Fugaku for a calculated second, which seems to startle his father, what with the twitch of his left eyebrow, then he blinks away, like he's considering. Only then,

does he answer. “I figure you’ve already made what you want from it.” He doesn’t miss the way Kakashi, to his left and as tense as he’s ever seen him, cringes just a little. There’s a weighted pause, the whole room holds its breath. They’re the first words Izuna has uttered since stepping foot in Konoha.

The Hokage plows on. “I’ve heard you possess a rather unique eye.”

Izuna doesn’t flinch. “I’ve heard I’ve been called a *yokai* from Wind to Frost.”

“May we see it?”

Izuna doesn’t falter, “Do you believe I’m a *yokai* , old man?” As if the heavens were mocking him, the sky darkens dramatically before it spits a lightning bolt. The thunderous rumble sounds like laughter. Izuna tries not to grin at the thought that he’s being haunted by treacherous foxes.

The Hokage smiles as if nothing happened, “I would if I heard it from multiple, trusted sources. Sources that say you have an eye unlike anything we’ve ever seen.”

Izuna knows this. He knows he’s been picked apart by crows and hounds and cats alike, all his secrets sold off for nothing but loyalty. He can’t hide his irritation any longer, and sends a particularly scathing look to a much too innocuous Kakashi.

He turns back to smugness, so subtle, like the hokage has got him right where he wants him. And perhaps that's the truth. Izuna doesn’t like it here, not in Konoha, not in this office, not pinned to the floor by wise old eyes, examining him like a bug. Izuna’s never taken kindly to authority. Konoha or otherwise.

Izuna opens his mouth to say something stupid.

“You have a Mangekyou,” his father interrupts, stunning them all into silence. Izuna is forced to look at him. He’s caught off guard, tilts his head up, trying to escape prying eyes. *He knows, doesn’t he?* “Who was it?”

Izuna’s brows pinch, Kakashi bows his head, a tiny movement that catches all the eyes, pulls them away from Izuna just long enough for him to rearrange his face. Fugaku’s not so easily fooled. He gets it almost too quick.

“That’s none of your concern.” Izuna dismisses it. He’s glad Itachi and Shisui aren’t here for this conversation. Itachi had to be ordered to leave when he insisted on being here for Izuna’s introductions. But alas, there could only be so many sharingan before everyone got antsy. “I’m not here to talk about my eyes.” He says it with finality, dredges up his old haughty air of superiority he’s had since he was 12.

“Then what are you here for, Izuna Uchiha? Kakashi tells me you wish to join us. Shouldn’t we know about your power if that’s the case?”

Izuna’s prepared to answer this time. “Yes, I do plan on joining Konoha. But you must understand. That I’m here to join you as an ally, that’s all.”

He can hear Kakashi's sharp intake of air, can feel his gaze on the back of his neck, questioning, resenting, burning. Izuna refuses to stumble. The hokage's brows raise slightly, Fugaku doesn't pretend to hold back his surprise as well. "What position do you have, to negotiate such things with Konoha. As far as we're concerned, you're a lone rouge," The hokage states, he pulls forth a pile of mission reports, scrawled in Itachi's and Kakashi's hand. "Here, 'he's a lone Uchiha, doesn't work well with others.' 'He secludes himself within the group' 'he told me that he travels alone, works alone, *is alone'."*

Izuna grins, shifts his weight forward and revels in the ripple of panic. But instead, he reaches forward, dropping a long strip of metal and fabric on the table, then retreats. The hokage takes it in his knobby hands, unfolds black fabric to reveal a carefully carved spiral. He looks up sharply.

"I'm here on behalf of the Uzukage-" The words feel forgien on his tongue, but they roll right out of his mouth and into reality. *Kurama's gonna kill me*... He can already feel the phantom pains of Kurama's chakra running through the seal, smarting the nerves on his shoulder without anything being there. But he can still remember the remnants of their shared chakra, him clinging to it when Obito returned, how it burned the cold rain right off his skin.

He spies Jiraiya sitting upright, his mouth agape, the stem of grass fluttering down to the floor. "-To negotiate the alliance of Konoha and Uzushio."

The Hokage's jaw is the first to click shut. His face twists into a scowl. "Last I heard of that…that *man* who calls himself Uzumaki, he wanted nothing to do with the title *kage.* What changed from then to now?"

Izuna scoffs. "Kurama's mind, obviously."

"Obviously," the hokage mutters under his breath. "And how can I be so certain that this is what our *good friend* Kurama wishes? For you to be here on his behalf?"

"Because," Izuna nods to the Hitai-ate, pressed between the hokages palms, "he gave me that, said I could go back there anytime I wanted. And…maybe I do want that. So as I see it, you've got two options."

"And those are?"

"You accept the fact that I'm here as Kurama's ambassador, and we continue negotiating this alliance, and I'll work *with* Konoha, not for you. Or, you don't. And I walk out those doors and you'll have let one of the most powerful shinobi slip through your fingers. But… *ah,* you're used to that, aren't you?"

The Hokage's glare darkens. Izuna only offers a fox's smirk in return. "I see a third option, or have you forgotten where you stand?"

Izuna knows what he's getting at. *"Try me."* He hisses right back. He can already feel the gathering of lightning under his skin, the swirl on his rinnegan, threading chakra through his thunder god seal, Kurama only a chakra pull away. "And see why they call me *yokai."* Thunder roars like a dragon overhead.

Everyone who is sitting stands up at once. The clan heads gathered in the corners of the office all take a step forward. The looming shadows of anbu peel off the walls, even the Hokage himself braces his arms on the desk and stifling sit up, murderous gleam in his old eyes. Izuna stands, with his arms loose by his sides and the circles of his rinnegan spinning behind his hair. He waits, with his breath held, for the tension to fall back away like the tides on a shore, before he speaks again.

“Like I said,” he says. He swipes his hitai-ate from the desk and holds it tight. “Two options.”

Chapter End Notes

It took me quite a bit of drafts to make this chapter work lmao? I wanted more bby Sasuke because he's just the best. Also Karasu coming in clutch to make Izuna the most badass bastard on the face of the earth. We stan foxes in this house. Yokai Izuna agenda

Homecoming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Itachi fiddles with the metal latch on his Anbu locker door. Shisui is right next to him, pacing the width of his room in a way that conveys nonchalance and nervousness all in one. They can both feel it thick in the air. In their bones. *Something's gonna go wrong.*

"I can't believe they kicked us out." Shisui mutters, he pauses to scowl at Itachi. Only then does he stop his fidgeting to glare up at his cousin in return. "What did you say to get us booted from that meeting?"

Itachi doesn't humor him with an answer. *Nothing.* His petulant thoughts speak for him. *Only that I want to be here. To make sure that my stupid older brother—no, that's not right—brother doesn't do something rash.* And what of *his* Sasuke anyway? He's pulls away from his obsession with Izuna to his other obsession. To Sasuke, young and dumb Sasuke. Reckless Sasuke. Sasuke who apparently has earned nicknames upon nicknames.

The Infamous Uchiha Escapee. He can't believe it. His little brother trying to run away? Part of him can't comprehend. But…all he has to do is look to the shadow that becomes his brother to know. To know that Sasuke will never see Konoha the way the rest of them do. Sasuke becomes loyal to people, and only people. But surely, with Itachi returned, these escape attempts will stop. He wants to believe they will.

Izuna would tell him otherwise.

Because Izuna told him who he's loved all these years, and how much he suffered for it, how much he denied it. But Naruto was like a force of gravity to Sasuke, and he's been helplessly caught in it since he can remember. Why would this Sasuke be any different, if that word Izuna uses is really true? Itachi hardly believes in gods and greater forces of the universe, but hearing Izuna talk about Naruto made him believe in those words Kurama threw around a bonfire. Soulmates.

So who's to say Sasuke, his Sasuke, won't be the same?

"How long has it been?" Shisui says.

"twenty minutes." Itachi says into his locker, rearranging his things for the fifteenth time to keep himself idle.

"Can't believe we haven't been called in yet," Shisui stops his pacing to flop down on the couch. The one Kakashi normally lands on after a mission to stare at the ceiling fan for infinitely too long. "Can't believe Izuna hasn't blown up the whole building yet."

"He won't," Itachi says with too much bite. He grinds his teeth together when Shisui catches on too fast. "I mean…he's not the type to do something like that."

He is absolutely the type. But…he won't. Will he? Itachi has to believe it. He *has* to. Izuna is his brother. He is *Sasuke* regardless of his age. Regardless of everything that has happened to him, Itachi will choose to believe that much.

"Really?" Shisui doesn't seem phased. He tosses a kunai up into the air and catches it. "Why's that? Because he's Uchiha? Bullshit." Shisui peers over at him, pins him with an eye. Itachi doesn't let him get under his skin. But the rift that's been forming between them… Itachi can't stand it. He wishes Shisui would let it be, but he's not the type. "Itachi…c'mon."

"What do you want me to say, Shisui?" He lifts a shoulder. "I just think Izuna's on our side, whether we realize it or not."

Shisui hums, goes back to flicking his kunai around his fingers. "I saw your eyes that night, Itachi."

Itachi looks around subtly.

"-Don't bother, no one's gonna be in here while Izuna's playing parlay with the Hokage."

Itachi twists the window blinds shut regardless. Outside, the rain had yet to subside. "You shouldn't say such reckless things regardless."

"Don't try to change the subject!" Shisui hisses. He sits up from his lounging. "I know you have a mangekyou now. I know it has to do with Izuna," He voice grows soft around the sharp accusations he's hurtling at Itachi, "But…please. If there's anyone in the world you can talk to…it's me, isn't it?"

Itachi sucks in a quick breath. He looks away, hides himself behind his locker door as if Shisui can't see right through him. He doesn't like this. He doesn't like keeping secrets from Shisui. But letting out one little secret will have them all tumbling down. Explain his eyes will avalanche into breaking down the very nature of time and space itself.

"I'm sorry," he whispers. "I can't."

Shisui sighs, clearly defeated. Itachi clicks his tongue, his heart twisting painfully. The slam of his locker rattles Shisui into standing once again. "You've got to understand, Shisui. It's got nothing to do with you."

"That's the problem isn't it?" Shisui mutters then.

"What?"

"That it's not about me. It's about Izuna. And everything about Izuna is riddled in…in *thousands* of secrets. That man wears secrets like his fucking cloak. He probably has more than all of Anbu and Root combined, and then some!" Shisui snarls then, fierce and angry like Itachi has never seen him.

"And you have them too now, apparently? You and Kakashi and Jiraiya? All…tied up in Izuna's secrets! Well. What if he's just a spider and it's all a web of lies!"

“It’s not.” Itachi says and Shisui’s eyes flash red. Itachi swirls his sharingan right back. He takes a step forward, then another, until he’s right in front of Shisui. “Please, Shisui. Trust me on this. I’m not wrong about him, I promise it.”

“That’s not something you can promise,” Shisui says. He looks away though, lets his sharingan die. “But…fine.”

“I wish I could tell you.” Itachi says. “But it’s bigger than just me. It’s bigger than just *him* too. Okay?”

Shisui scoffs. “Sure. I get it.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” He points to the door that leads out into the world. “I’m not wrong when I say this, Itachi. Unless Izuna comes clean about who and what he is—because we all *know* he’s not who he says he is—he’ll be an outsider. Regardless of what you feel, regardless of what I think…People will ask questions he’ll never answer. People will pry and find smoke and shadows, which will prompt them to pry farther. He’ll never be safe until he comes clean.”

Itachi barely keeps himself from scowling. His mouth pulls into a taut line, rigid, ready to turn into a grimace. “I know.”

“And you’re willing to follow him down into his shadows huh?” Shisui asks, incredulous.

Itachi shakes his head. “It won’t come to that. Izuna’s not here to harm Konoha *or* the clan.”

Shisui open his mouth, but the door swings open just at that moment. Beetle is practically vibrating in his sandals as he spots the two of them. “You two won’t believe the shit Izuna’s been saying in that meeting-”

Shisui leaps forward and grabs the man by his shoulders, “Tell us!” He shouts, much too excited for the somber mood he’s left the room in.

Beetle jabs his thumb behind him, into the hall, “hear it yourselves, Uchiha’s, Fugaku has requested the two of you as Izuna’s guards while he gets settled.”

“Settled? He’s staying then?”

Beetle snorts. “Well, it would be rude to kick our newest ally’s ambassador to the curb for all the fire he’s been spitting at our ‘kage, now wouldn’t it?”

“Ambassador?!” Itachi and Shisui gasp as one. *What the hell is he thinking?!* Their plan was to keep Izuna’s involvement of the Jinchuuriki incident purely for his own self interest, nothing political. Izuna was supposed to stick to his bounty-hunter origins, and Kurama was simply paying for his services in collecting Jinchuuriki. He was supposed to offer that same deal to Konoha, that he would work *with* Konoha as a hired killer and informant. That way, if Konoha wanted any sort of reconciliation for their lost jinchuuriki, or if they ever decided to press Kurama into giving Naruto back, Izuna wouldn’t be involved at all. It would free him

up to do what he's *supposed* to be doing—hunting down the remaining Akatsuki and, y'know, saving the world?

But *no.* That idiot had to go and get himself strung up into political *hell.*

Itachi bursts out of the Anbu lounge and sprints down the hall to reach the Hokage's office. Shisui is hot on his heels. There's huge clusters of people milling around outside the large double doors, dozens of people pressing their ears to the walls, chittering and chattering about what could possibly be going on inside. Itachi and Shisui skid to a halt before the guards, who tap the doors. "Itachi Uchiha and Shisui Uchiha have arrived."

They swing inwards, and Itachi holds his breath, preparing for the onslaught of eyes that inevitably swivel towards the two of them. The talk dies down from both sides, until there's nothing but the rain drumming the window and the roll of thunder. The last to look up from his spot is Izuna. He's been given a chair, a rare thing when facing the Hokage, and he lounges on it as if it were a throne.

When Itachi finally catches Izuna's gaze, the sky blackens for a second before lightning strikes. When his sight returns, Izuna's face has broken out into a devious grin, one filled with triumph and childish glee he's seen a thousand times in Sasuke.

How could I have missed it? His heart clenches at the thought.

Secluded in the corner is Kakashi with his face so impossibly blank, looking like he had all those weeks ago before Izuna's existence was ever known. Itachi can barely muster any sympathy in the whirlwind that follows, not to mention somewhere in the back of his head, he's tearing Kakashi's eyes out for even *looking* at Izuna. But that's neither here nor there, and Kakashi's feelings—hurt or otherwise—hardly matter in the grand scheme of things. And *oh,* the things Izuna's just done.

"Then we've settled this matter for now?" Izuna says, more like, tosses the words over his shoulder at the Hokage, who grumbles as he catches them.

"That arrogance of yours will come back to bite you one day, *boy,"* The hokage mutters at him. He sighs heavily. "If you had any other family name, this conversation would have gone very differently."

Izuna snorts. He stands from his throne-chair and—regardless of his height—looms over everyone in the room. "If I had any other name, we wouldn't be having this conversation. Now. I'm tired. I'm hungry. I haven't had a proper shower in fucking *years.* So." He waves his hands about, something restless in the way he moves that's so unlike him.

"We're resuming this matter tomorrow. When the rain lets up." The Hokage waves his hand, dismissing them all, and the whole room seems to sag under the loss of pressure. Itachi keeps his excitement from bubbling over, but just barely. He catches his father's eye, which for once, seems pleased with the outcome of things. And that onto itself is worrying.

But. Izuna is *here.* In Konoha. He's here and Itachi can just…Breathe for a second. Fugaku steps forward, towards Izuna, and Itachi can tell he's a bit stunned. Izuna shifts back on his

heels like he wants to flee, but he doesn't. He holds strong. Itachi notices his hand clenching and unclenching by his side regardless.

"Come," their father says gruffly to the three of them, "we still have much to discuss." He leads them out the doors, where the crowds are being corralled and dispersed. But there are still vultures vying for a glimpse of the now famous Izuna Uchiha. When Izuna falls into step beside him, Itachi steps on his foot. He gets an elbow to the bicep in return.

"Where is Izuna staying?" Shisui asks, innocently enough.

"The Uchiha Compound," Fugaku answers, "He's one of us. After all."

Itachi can see right through his father, and judging by Izuna's narrowed eyes, so can he. Their father thinks that Izuna will abandon his loyalties to Kurama and Uzushio if he's reintegrated into the clan. To pledge himself to the Uchiha and the Uchiha alone. If Izuna did such a thing, that would put their whole coup d'etat in the prime position to strike. No. Izuna would wipe the floor with Konoha blood if that were to happen.

But it won't. Because Izuna knows as well as Itachi that a coup's not happening. And regardless of how twisted Izuna can be, thoughts are only thoughts. And Izuna looks like he'd rather be anywhere in the world right about now, and…frankly. Itachi feels the same.

By the time they've made it out of the administration building, an inevitable sense of dread curls its way into Itachi's stomach and settles there like a disgruntled old cat. Behind his eyes, he can still see the bloodshed he could cause. He can feel the blood dripping down his fingers, running rivers in the streets, and even hear Sasuke's phantom screams.

It's still pouring rain, even more than before, with no sign of letting up soon. "Where did this rain come from?" Fugaku questions out loud before he turns to them. "Now's not the weather for sightseeing, we'll head straight for our house and be done with it."

"He's staying at our *house?"* Itachi blurts out the second his father finishes speaking. And now Izuna's restlessness comes into focus. He can't tell if his brother is ready to run away, or run towards his old home, to see their mother, to see *himself.*

He's gonna throw up.

Fugaku tilts his head, eyebrows furrowing into his typical frown. "Yes…He is. As the head family it's our duty to welcome…guests." He says it strangely. Izuna and Itachi share a look of mutual apprehension, but all protests die in his throat. What could he say that wouldn't lead to more suspicion between them?

"Shisui," His father continues, " you can stay for dinner, but I'm sure your family will wish to see you after a long journey?"

Shisui straights just a little being addressed. "Uh. Yeah…Yes, they…uh," He glances at Izuna, who feigns disinterest the second Shisui's eye lands on him. "I'll eat, thank you."

“Then let's go, before this insufferable rain gets any worse.” Izuna tries and fails to hide his smirk.

Itachi ends up falling beside him once again as they take off into the streets. Rain pelts like needles against his face. One glare at Izuna tells him all he needs to know. Something of his has caused this storm. Just like before, on the ocean, when he conjured up a storm using their fire techniques. Now what?

Over the rain and wind, there’s not much room for chit-chat, so the run is relatively silent save for their feet hitting pavement and the torrent swirling around them. Not that Fugaku is much of a small talk kind of person, to which Itachi is now eternally grateful.

“How d’you think Sasuke’s gonna react?” Shisui shouts against the storm, clearly not getting the memo. Izuna and Itachi both whip around to stare at him. Shisui grins at Izuna instead, “That’s Itachi’s brother!” He adds at the end as if it's necessary.

A myriad of emotions flit through Izuna’s one visible eye. “I don’t know. Honestly,” He mutters. More to himself than anything. Itachi nudges him gently, going for reassurance, but there’s no words to describe the predicament Izuna’s about to face. Itachi wouldn’t know how to react either. He can tell though, that Izuna’s putting on a brave face. But each step he takes is heavier than the last.

The run through Konoha is much too quick.

There’s no way either of them are truly prepared for what could happen when Izuna meet Sasuke. Or rather when Sasuke meets himself. All too soon, they’re piling onto the front step of Itachi’s house, barely sheltered by the slight awning above their door. Fugaku grumbles something about keeping the house clean as he brushes rainwater and dirt from his shoulders. Then he’s swinging the door open and beckoning the rest of their trodden crew inside.

Shisui goes first.

Then it’s just the brothers on the doorstep, staring into the abyss of a house that was once a home. Itachi can feel the lightning gathering around Izuna’s form, so potent the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, even through his rain slick ponytail. Izuna’s face is stormy, mouth set into a jagged line. He takes a step back, and Itachi reacts instantly. He latches onto Izuna’s cloak like his very own life line.

The two lock eyes. *Try running away from this.* Itachi challenges while Izuna silently glares at him to let go. Itachi wins in the end. Izuna knows what he must do. He can’t run from the Uchiha’s forever, though Itachi…despite wanting Izuna to face this with him, is also terrified for him. And so, when the two finally take shelter from the storm, Itachi’s stomach is just as turbulent as the winds and the clouds outside.

It only goes downhill from there.

The second he looks up from taking off his shoes, he sees his mother. She’s ringing her hands together, eyes narrowing at Izuna before she can fix her face into a pleasant smile when Izuna turns to meet her. Itachi can see him freeze, can see how all his muscles go stiff, how he leans

back as if to flee. Even the lightning under his skin seems to spark. Thunder growls low, the lights in the house wane.

“Izuna,” Fugaku says, jolting Izuna out of his paralysis, “This is my wife, Mikoto. You’ve already met Itachi, the eldest son, obviously. And Sasuke, the one Shisui mentioned, is the younger.”

Fugaku pauses, awaiting an answer.

Izuna glances, almost fretfully, between Fugaku, Mikoto, and Itachi. Then his brow furrows and he turns back to face their mother. “Right.” He bows after a stilted second to which Shisui snorts. Itachi elbows him in the ribs and makes him cough instead. “It’s…nice to meet you, Mikoto. I’m…Izuna,” He says. Itachi’s never seen Izuna bow to anyone before. And clearly this surprises Fugaku as well. Mikoto, on the other hand, seems all too pleased with this.

“Well then!” She turns a stern eye onto Fugaku. “I was not aware we’d be having so much company tonight.” To which his father mutters something like, *‘short notice’* while Mikoto gives Izuna a pleasant smile. “Please get yourselves settled in while I prepare dinner. Oh. And Itachi, go check on Sasuke, he’s been…Odd lately.”

That caught his attention. And Izuna’s.

“Odd? How so?” He asks, barely waiting for a response as he worms his way from between Fugaku and Shisui to slip down the hall. “Is this about him being picked up by an Abbu near the gate?”

“Yes. And…other things. He won’t shut up about…” Mikoto flicks her eyes about, then waves him off. “Nevermind, just talk to him?”

Itachi tries not to let the implications of his mother’s vagueness haunt him as he ascends the stairs to the second floor in record time. Sasuke’s door is jammed shut, locked from the inside. Itachi has a moment where he considers picking the lock, but he knocks instead.

“Sasuke?” He calls. “It’s Itachi, I’m home.” He tries to be patient, really. He can hear Sasuke shuffling just on the other side of the door. There’s…something else though. Itachi can’t quite place the sound. It’s some sort of animal, he’s sure of that. He can hear its feet hit the ground with a scrape of claws, and Sasuke shushing it.

“I’ll be right back,” He can hear Sasuke whisper. Suspicions high, Itachi puts his hand on the door handle and twists it slowly. He flares out his chakra, trying to sense the creature, but it's no summons. Sasuke starts to giggle quietly, and that’s when Itachi figures it out. A second set of laughter, devious and carefree. And *ah.*

The storm had not come to Konoha because of Izuna.

It came for Sasuke.

Itachi picks the lock and rips the door open just as Karasu's white tipped tail disappears in the closet. "Nii-san!" Sasuke yelps. "You're back!" Sasuke's eyes dart to his closet. He's always been a shit liar. His brother runs up to him and bear hugs him around the middle, effectively forcing him to stop in his tracks and back out into the hall once again. He looks down to huge black eyes staring up at him, innocent and wide and grinning with a bit of mischief.

How could I have missed it? Itachi sighs to himself. He can't help but smile at his ridiculously dramatic brother. He can't help but to smile at the irony of his life, of his brother's life. For one second, he forgets about the fox and the storm and all the dread down the stairs. He lets himself curl around Sasuke and holds him as tight as possible.

After a second, Sasuke's irritation finally wins over, and he pulls away to hit Itachi's stomach. "Why did you leave?! No warning! No goodbye! No…no-" Sasuke pats his own forehead and glares at him. Itachi nearly breaks down laughing. Or crying.

He sighs instead, kneels down in front of Sasuke, and pokes his forehead as requested. "Forgive me, Sasuke." He says genuinely, remembers the mockery Izuna made of these words those nights ago, and says it anyway, "Forgive me, for not being here, for not…if I've worried you. I'm sorry."

Sasuke stares at him. Then he frowns and looks away. His arms cross over his chest and he pouts. "It's not *you* that's the problem."

Itachi's taken aback. *What else, then? Can he…can he* sense *Izuna's presence? How does time travel work?*

"What is it then?"

Sasuke's face suddenly goes bright pink, he freezes for a second then his scowl deepens indefinitely. He throws his hands up dramatically. "Nothing! It's *Nothing!"*

"Nothing?" Itachi doesn't have the slightest clue what Sasuke's talking about. Unless… "Are you going to keep that poor fox locked in your closet all throughout dinner?"

Sasuke's mouth falls open. "You… *you-"*

Itachi sighs, then he scoots Sasuke out of his way and goes into his room. There's muddy paw prints all over his floor, and black fox hair in his *bed.* He gets to the closet and Sasuke sputters. "Wait, *wait!"* He pulls on Itachi's shirt, but Itachi flicks him on the forehead this time with a solid *twack.*

"You can't keep animals in your room, Sasuke." He warns.

"You do it all the time!" Sasuke jumps in front of the door and tries to shove Itachi away. "And Karasu's not gonna *hurt* me!"

Itachi freezes. *"Karasu?"*

"I named him-"

“You named him-”

“After your crows! Because he’s carrying a message-I know it’s not for me, but he showed up in my window *twice* and it was raining and he was tired and I thought-”

Itachi’s still caught up on the name. He named it Karasu? He named it because it reminded him of Itachi’s crows? *Izuna named Karasu after my crows?*

“Sasuke.” He says sternly. His brother’s outstretched arms hold for only another second as they stare each other down. Finally, Sasuke relents. Itachi reaches around him and pulls the door open.

And there he is. The two tailed bastard himself. Karasu sits with his glassy eyes upturned and his twin tails wagging aggressively. In his mouth is a scroll that has Itachi swearing. “How long has he been in here?” He asks, almost too afraid to know the answer. The waves patterned into the scroll *haunt* him.

Sasuke looks at his feet and lifts a shoulder. “He came here when that Anbu took me home.”

Right when it started raining. Right when Izuna arrived.

“Sasuke…that’s…he’s…this is…” It’s rare he’s rendered so dumbfounded by his own brother. Well, this version of him, anyway. That scroll is from Kurama, no doubt. And Izuna is surely the recipient. Fuck. That could’ve saved them all a lot of headache if they had Kurama’s most updated letter. But…well. Sasuke reaches forward—Itachi instinctively goes to stop him, but refrains—and pets Karasu between the ears. The fox keens at the attention.

Itachi looks out to the open door, hears the faint chit chat of whatever is happening downstairs, and decides then and there.

“Has anyone else seen him with you?”

“Mom did, the first time.”

The first- Itachi nearly has an aneurysm. “Oh…kay…Sasuke, listen to me.” Sasuke turns to face him. “We have company right now. There’s gonna be…a man staying with us for a little while.”

“A man?” Sasuke mutters, unimpressed.

“He’s…from Uzushio.” Itachi supplies half heartedly.

Sasuke can clearly tell something’s wrong. He hugs Karasu around the neck. “And? What’s this gotta do with Karasu? Why can’t I keep him? He loves me, look!” Sasuke and Karasu both look at him with mirrored puppy-eyes. Itachi shuts his own and turns away.

“Karasu doesn’t belong to you.”

“But he came to *me!”*

Yeah. What's up with that anyway? Did he confuse Sasuke with Izuna? Or…or is this something that would have always happened to Sasuke? Izuna had told him once, that not even he knew the reason the regular foxes followed him. Karasu, on the other hand, was sent specifically by Kurama. "Look, Sasuke…you're gonna see Karasu again." Itachi scoffs, "a lot sooner than you know. It's okay, he'll come back when he wants. But he's got a scroll, which means he's working right now."

Sasuke's pout doesn't let up for a second, but he seems to mull over the words. "That guy… who was with you at the gate…"

Itachi clamps down on his sudden nerves. "Yeah?"

"He's the one who's staying with us? Why?"

"Because he's an Uchiha."

Sasuke perks up. "Does he have the sharingan? Is he strong?"

Itachi's heart sinks inexplicably. "Yeah. He's strong."

* * *

Sasuke is reluctant to let Karasu out of his sight. But he eventually allows Itachi to open up his window. Karasu is confused for a second, almost goes straight downstairs instead. Itachi has a mini panic attack while trying to herd the unruly fox out of Sasuke's room so he can appear in their front doorway instead. Once both fluffy tails are out the window, and Karasu dreches himself in his own storm—purple fire hissing and sputtering, hovering outside their window, whining—Itachi says a quick 'sorry' to the fox before shutting him outside. Sasuke bemoans putting on new clothes that aren't slathered in black fox hair and drool.

"Drool, Sasuke? Really?"

"His mouth's been around that fucking scroll for hours, he's gonna drool a little!"

"What did you sa-"

"Nothing!"

By the time Sasuke's no longer stinking of fox, Mikoto's calling them both down for their impromptu dinner. And Itachi's stomach is in more knots than he's ever experienced. Perhaps a comparable night would be the nine tails attack. He doesn't really know if they could be comparable. But whatever nervous energy Izuna's spouting into the atmosphere is highly contagious at the right frequency, and he's been on Izuna's wavelength ever since that dreaded night.

So to say he's gonna puke out his guts the second he eats something is an understatement. He fusses with Sasuke to stall, and his brother's not having it any longer, and runs down the stairs just to escape him.

Ugh.

He's never really enjoyed family dinners, unless Sasuke's there to do something stupid. But now. There's *two* Sasuke's. And Shisui. The tension in the room could be cut with a kunai when he steps in, Sasuke standing frozen in the doorway. Him and Izuna have engaged in the most intense staring contest on this side of the universe, and nothing, not even Fugaku's "Sasuke, don't be rude, sit down" can't stop it. Itachi ends up scooping Sasuke up and plopping him down next to himself. Izuna's spot at the table, however, is directly in front of his younger self.

They're studying each other, sizing each other up like opponents on the battlefield, Izuna's eyes are sharp and careful and curious, Sasuke's just the same. Itachi tries to kick Izuna under the table to get him to stop, but not even that works. Instead, Izuna just says, "So you're Sasuke, huh?"

There's a tense moment when both Fugaku and Mikoto are about ready to kill Izuna within a moment's notice. They're not stupid. They know something's happening, but what, exactly, they're blind to. All they see is an unknown shinobi singling out the youngest at the table. Never a good sign.

But Sasuke doesn't get it. Why would he? He's staring at himself. The two of them are probably the most intune at the table. To drive home that point, Sasuke just sniffs and points his nose in the air like a brat. "Yeah. What's it to you, bastard?"

Shisui snots out the drink he'd been sipping. "Sorry, sorry," he mutters just as Mikoto hisses "Sasuke!"

Izuna scoffs. "Who taught you to say that?"

"That's none'your business, mister." Sasuke snips, then like a switch being flipped, he remembers something. "You're crazy strong right? Do you have a sharingan?"

"Hn…" Izuna hums in his throat, puts his elbow on the table and leans his cheek on his knuckles. "That's none of your business. Brat."

There's a spark of hostility between the two, mischievous on Izuna's side, pure indignant rage on Sasuke's.

"Okay!" Mikoto claps her hands once to get their attention. "I hope this is enough food for everyone. If need be we can drag out some of the leftovers. Please, enjoy. And Izuna, it's a pleasure to be hosting you during your stay, but please don't antagonize my children…even if they *do* deserve it."

Izuna and Sasuke are effectively culled, both muttering out apologies that sound the same, one voice just an octave lower than the other. It makes Itachi incredibly nervous. There's no

way that Izuna can keep his secret if he sticks around Sasuke long enough. He's still *Sasuke* despite everything that's happened.

"So, Izuna." Fugaku starts, as if he's about to talk about the weather and not some other bullshit, "I'm curious about how you've avoided Konoha for so long. I didn't know there were any Uchiha outside the village."

Izuna lifts his shoulder in that noncommittal shrug that suggests he's about to lie out his ass. "There's not." Fugaku's eyebrows draw together, about to interject, but Izuna's faster, knows too much, will only say too little. "They're all dead."

Mikoto's eyes flit from Fugaku to Sasuke, then back again. She smacks his arm lightly, a que for him to change the subject. Good thing Izuna's as tragic as he is strong, any topic about who he is and where he came from is just a minefield. Not a good conversation to have with Sasuke around.

Fugaku clears his throat. "Then…how did you come into service of this…Kurama Uzumaki?"

At the mention of Uzumaki, Sasuke jumps in his skin, bangs his knee on the table, and draws too much attention to himself. He swears under his breath. Itachi pats his back. *What? What about Uzumaki—*

He catches sight of Izuna, staring so intently as his younger self, knowing too much, understanding it… *living* it.

"You're not the problem." Sasuke had said. *Naruto Uzumaki is the problem.*

"We-" Izuna reluctantly tears his eyes from Sasuke. "-had a mutual…friend." Izuna practically bites the word in half as it leaves his mouth, like he can't believe he's said such a thing. Fugaku takes this tiny bit of information and is not satisfied.

"What's he like? I've heard only horror stories."

Izuna's face twitches, an almost smile that graces his mouth before it falls, and with dead seriousness, he says, "I'm afraid there's only horror stories to tell. If those horrors you speak of are rescuing jinchuuriki and rebuilding a lost village."

"You hold him in high regard then?"

Izuna sighs. "Unforchunately."

Sasuke tugs at Itachi's elbow, he leans down for him to whisper, "What's a jinchuuriki?"

Itachi shushes him, "I'll tell you later," and pokes his head. Sasuke scowls and kicks him under the table.
"Kurama's strong isn't he? It's suspected he's a jinchuuriki himself. Do you know which bijuu he is?"

There's only the slightest twitch of Izuna's eye to betray his growing restlessness. Itachi resists the urge to look directly at him. Instead, he focuses on pushing rice up the walls of his bowl and pushing it back down again. Shisui, on the other hand, is rapt at attention, leaning over the table to stare down Izuna with the intensity of a thousand suns.

Izuna blinks. "Kurama's strong, yes. He's an Uzumaki. There's a reason that they were targeted the way they were." He ignores the jinchuuriki accusation.

Sasuke suddenly slams a hand on the table, making all the dishes rattle. He gets a scorching glare from their parents, but he ignores them like Izuna ignores questions. "Are you stronger than him!?"

Izuna 's initial shock melts into something akin to irritation. He scowls like he's dredging up a particularly foul memory. "We're evenly matched," he mutters, like it's a curse. "I think."

"You think? You've never fought him?" Sasuke inches himself closer. "Are Uzumaki all the same? What does Kurama look like? Does he have blond hair? Where do you live? Where's…" Sasuke looks at Itachi for help, whispers, "whats that place he's from again?"

"Uzushio?"

Sasuke turns back to Izuna, "Uzushio! Where's that?"

Izuna's got this look. Itachi can only describe it as longing. "It's a little island, east of the sea."

And Sasuke falls back into his seat, silent shock all over his face. But then he buries it, covers it up with something more mischievous, more like a scheme brewing. Itachi didn't think he could hold that expression as well as Izuna. Time has changed Sasuke into a near-inhuman like figure before him, but by his side he's starting to realize…it's just Sasuke through and through.

The rest of their late dinner continues on without another outburst from Sasuke. Izuna continues to dodge questions, or sometimes he'll answer them with devastating blows that immediately shut people up.

"So Izuna…got anyone special?"

"...he's dead."

"Family?"

"Brother killed them."

"Hometown?"

"Never really had one."

And that last one makes Itachi's head spin. *Never?* He refrains from glancing at Sasuke, at how his eyes dart away to peek up at Izuna through his bangs as if his older self doesn't

notice, at the way he leans to and fro, body and mind restless. He used to be so calm, so still.

Soulmates. The word comes back to him unbridled, steeped in a memory of flames and smoke and a swirling, star filled sky. Kurama's words spoken softly before a bonfire. As if he believed it, as if he's seen it. *Soulmates.* He was talking about Naruto. About Sasuke.

Itachi's head tries to wrap around it, how Sasuke's life had been tied to a single person, a little blond boy, jinchuuriki in all, their stories been written already, hasn't it?

Dinner concludes slowly, wraps up with lingering bodies around an empty table. His mother's eyes sharply trace up and down Izuna's face. Itachi wonders when she'll latch onto his features the way he did, or if she already knows. There's no way she'll be fooled forever. Fugaku…maybe. He's always been a bit too practical to really *look* at things, despite his superb ocular prowess. He skips over what's important, focuses on the logistics.

"Izuna can sleep in the guest bedroom," Fugaku says, pulling Itachi out of his solemn thoughts, "Itachi, could he help him set up?"

Itachi nods his head. When he stands, he reaches out and pokes Sasuke's head on instinct, causing his brother to scowl. He refrains from shouting again, probably already knowing their parents are about to scold him for how he's been behaving for the last two hours or so.

Shisui bids farewell and sends Itachi a death glare that reminds him of their earlier conversation. *And you're willing to follow him into the shadows?*

Yes. Yes he is.

Because Izuna is Sasuke, and Sasuke will never be Izuna if he has any say in the matter.

Maybe he doesn't. Sasuke's fate is tied to another already. Red strings and all that.

"We haven't had a guest over for a long time now." Itachi says just to say something as he and Izuna ascend the stairs to the second floor, "The futon is probably covered in dust by now. It's not so bad." They pass Sasuke's room, his door slightly parted, and Izuna stops to stare at it. Itachi pauses, itches to get moving again, and waits for Izuna's eyes to return to the present.

He's lost in a thought.

Or a thousand.

If itachi thinks about it too hard, his own future-memories would surface, and he'd be thinking about it too.

"How long has it been since you were back here?" Itachi asks him.

Izuna's eyes drag. They keep flicking to the tiny sliver of Sasuke's room that's visible. But finally, they land on Itachi, and all he sees in Izuna's dark eye is his own reflection. When he speaks, it's barely a whisper, so low that Itachi only hears it because he can read his mouth.

“I left when I was twelve. It was all gone before I could return again.” Izuna scoffs, takes one last look before he brushes past Itachi and opens the correct door without hesitation. “Not that I ever really wanted to return back then.”

“And what about now?”

The room is barren, tatami mats in perfect order, everything covered in a faint layer of dust. The window is firmly shut, latched, blinds in perfect working order, not a single disturbance. Izuna walks over to the window swiftly and flicks the blinds so they lay a little crooked.

“Now?” Izuna sighs, eyes roaming all over the place and its impersonal perfection. “I’ve grown used to broken windows.”

Chapter End Notes

BB Sasuke just tryna live his life fr. Also this chapter is strange and weirdly long but also pretty short?? And Idk, I wanted Itachi's POV? I had NO idea how to write Izuna's for it so I went with a safer option, and I think its just fun to see Sasuke and Izuna square up like that. Oh, and the next chapter is your good old fashioned romantic ✨angst✨ as a treat.

IRL stuff:
I made cool shit for my major lmao? A neat little necklace. (I say little but its fucking massive, also soldered sooo much chain, more than i needed ahah) My hands are getting soooo beat up tho. I'm taking like a 5hr metalsmithing class and by the time we're done I swear my wrists are like...numb. It's fucking F U N tho. There's this metalsmithing artist that I found on insta that makes these INSANE wire masks and FUCK i wanna learn that shit. Anyway, I'm making dumb rings rn. Cool cool.

Always the Fool With the Slowest Heart

Chapter Notes

I have a proposition.

I give: Angst

I receive: Your tears. (And perhaps a kudos and a fun comment)

Deal?

Chapter title is a lyric from Gilded Lily by Cults (There's this chanting chorus part thats just "Haven't I given enough?" breaks me up inside think abt everyone in this fic lmao)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’ll set up your futon,” Itachi mumbles, scuttling over to the closet before Izuna has a chance to turn around. To tell him, *like hell I’m staying here.*

There’s blood dripping down the walls that no one else can see. Izuna’s been smelling that metallic tang since he stepped foot in the compound. It’s not real, of course it’s not, but this place has been a ghost town since forever. And now he’s here, now it’s not, and Izuna can’t deal with it.

He wants this, he wants to be here.

He can’t.

During dinner, he refused to eat any of the meat given to him. He doubts the smell of braised pork has ever been more revolting, regardless if it’s his mother who cooks it. His mother who sounds different than what he remembers too. Who doesn’t wear perfume but smells like soap and whatever it is she cooked that day. She smiled at Izuna as if she knew him.

Maybe she’s already figured it all out.

Itachi plops the folded up futon on the ground—Izuna’s thoughts drop just the same—before flipping it open and patting it down. “Do you need anything else?” He asks when he’s done.

“No.”

Itachi stands and hovers around him like he’s waiting for Izuna to say something more. He looks up at him while Izuna can’t stand to do the same. “Do you…want to talk about…”

“Not really.” Izuna dismisses him. It doesn’t matter what exactly Itachi’s wanting to bring up. Perhaps the fact that he went off and made himself important. Maybe it’s to do with Sasuke and why he’s acting like…well. He’s acting like Sasuke. Izuna can’t really understand why Itachi looked so alarmed, Sasuke seems like Sasuke to him. He’s always been like that, right? Maybe it’s about all these things that keep happening, the way his eyes linger on walls and windows and doors like they’re going to jump out at him. Perhaps Itachi can hear how violently his heart’s been hammering against his ribs.

He turns to his brother and waves at him to come closer. He does so without hesitance, without fear. “I’m not your problem child, Itachi,” He mutters, pokes his forehead and keeps his fingers pressed there, pressing back until Itachi stumbles out past the threshold of the room. Izuna could marvel all day at how easy it is to lead Itachi this way and that, all because of who he is. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Itachi’s too powerful to be that easily manipulated. Then again most Uchiha are slaves to their emotions despite what they wish everyone else to believe.

“Wait-” Itachi starts, but Izuna doesn’t let up.

“That’s Sasuke’s job,” He finishes his sentence with a push, sends Itachi into the hallway and shuts the door so hard it rattles the wooden frame.

He’s aware of the shadow looming behind paper, even as he slumps down the wall, kicks his feet out in front of him, and runs a hand down his face. The walls close in ever so slowly, shadows growing long and dark the more he stares at them. Kicking Itachi out of his room does little to relieve the mounting panic he’s been drowning in for hours.

And that’s when the window rattles his thoughts from his brain. He can hear the patter of rain through glass and blinds, the far off rumbling of thunder, wind, and something more solid tapping away at the glass. Izuna rises slowly, feels like he’s 200 instead of 20, and goes to that dreadful window, flicks open the blinds to be greeted by darkness.

And fire.

A black form, flickers of purple, and Karasu happily grinning at him from the other side. Between his teeth he holds a scroll. One of *Kurama’s.* Izuna rolls his eyes at such a display, hauls the window open and gets a gust of wet, autumn air that smells of coming winter. And fox. Lots of wet fox in the air tonight.

“Where have you been, you piece of shit?” Izuna hisses at him. All he gets is a devious grin and a peel of laughter. He steps aside and the fox barrels through, bringing half the storm with him. He leaps onto Izuna’s chest first thing, nose rubbing all over his face and hands, little whines and growls and teeth snapping at his throat. Two tails lash back and forth even as Izuna bodily throws him off, he’s getting water everywhere.

“Give it,” Izuna snaps at him, but Karasu is clearly not in his right mind, and jumps away from him playfully when he reaches for the scroll. “Please?” He acquiesces. Karasu pauses, ears swiveling forward, giving him his best puppy eyes—all black and glassy—before he creeps forward. Karasu slinks along the ground, stomach brushing the floor, before he goes belly up in front of Izuna, and relinquishes the scroll to him.

“You’re weird,” Izuna muses, fighting the smile from taking over his face, as he plucks the scrolls from between Karasu’s pearly teeth. He gives him a good scratch of the thick fur around his neck. “You know, your help would’ve been much appreciated a few days ago. Or even a few hours ago. Perhaps I wouldn’t have to make up all that shit about Kurama being a ‘kage.” Izuna looks down at him. “He’s going to try to kill me when I get back, hn?” Karasu’s ears flatten. A paw comes up and jabs him under the chin.

“Fine.” Izuna pushes at Karasu’s nose until the fox starts trying to snap at his hand. Meanwhile, he unravels the scrolls to reveal Kurama’s most recent horrors.

Hey brat,

Naruto’s been staring off into space ever since you left. Guess it can’t be helped. He’s been begging for ramen so I found that Uzumaki you were talking about. A deal is being made. Guess I have my first non-jinchuuriki resident, excluding wandering Uchiha’s, that is. Uzushio’s main export before the fall, take a wild guess, is fish from the area. Apparently there’s a rare kind of tropical fish that likes to congregate in the storm between the seals.

Her name is Uteki Uzumaki. That’s her picture. Don’t forget it…just in case.

By the time you get this, you should be in Konoha so tell that son of a bitch Hokage that Naruto’s off the table for good. He’s mine. One day he might even be Uzukage. Hah. As for all that kage crap for myself, I’m not sure that’s the best idea you’ve had. I can think of someone else who might fit the hat more than me. Bijuu aren’t meant to rule over humans, no matter how much we like to gloat.

By the way, Your foxes are miserable without you. Naruto cheers them up and distracts them enough. Aka spends most of her time by the beach. Did you know she’s going to get her second tail soon?

In other news, I’m going to Kiri to fix another kage issue.

Don’t ignore me this time.

-Kurama.

Oh. I thought you might want this.

Below is a low level storage seal. When Izuna releases it, there’s another scroll. It’s got ink spilled on the corner of the reddish fabric, and a crudely drawn fox with nine tails sitting perfectly on the paper holding the edges together. Izuna peels off the paper and lets the scroll roll across the ground.

That idiot. Izuna sucks in a quick breath.

He writes his reply quickly, skims over the part where he did, in fact, declare that Kurama is Uzukage and that's he's now the official Uzushio ambassador, skips entirely over the part where that means he has in fact accepted to become a shinobi for Uzushio, and also says nothing about his disastrous meeting with his family. He goes into depth about everyone who knows and all the things that happened with Obito, *minus* everything that happened with Kakashi by the river. He ends it with a *Don't be fucking dumb,* signs his name and paints a strong seal on the front.

He's about to send Karasu on his way when he hears Itachi tiptoeing outside his room again. His blood freezes, body stiff, aware of everything all at once. He's been distracted, but the second he comes back to reality, it slips away again. "Izuna?" He hears Itachi's muffled voice. "Are you…do you need anything?"

"No." Izuna barely manages to speak. All the sudden there's red in his vision. He blinks his eyes, rubs them a second later and examines his hands for blood. There is none. It's just his mind playing tricks again. It's just a memory. A floorboard creaks as Itachi walk past. It sends Izuna's heart into a frenzy. He hears a quieter, "Goodnight, Sasuke." as Itachi moves on.

It tears something up inside Izuna's soul.

* * *

What am I doing here?

Izuna stands in a vacant living room. Or, what he can only assume is such. It's attached to a small kitchen, separated by a little island bar. Two little stools are pushed all the way in, looking never used. The hardwood floors are pristine, save for a fine layer of dust that gathers thicker in the corners. Izuna feels as if he's stepped into a showroom instead of a lived-in space. There's not a single thing visible that could indicate someone is living there. There's not even a kettle on the two-burner gas stove. The fridge is narrow, looks brand new save for a single spot of rust near the bottom. Unbroken moonlight filters through the slits of the blinds.

When Izuna peeks through them, he can see the only sign of life. Dozens upon dozens of trip wire and Konoha standard seal-traps decorating every inch of the window's border, threading lines of familiar chakra up the walls. The front door is similarly arranged. Izuna is careful not to disturb the dust building in the corners of the room. If he looks close enough, he can spot fine dog hairs piled under the barstools that have never been pushed out. He goes to the fridge first and cracks it open silently. Nothing but a bag of rotting vegetables sitting in the far corner, half a loaf of bread that may or may not be moldy despite being in the cold, and a suspicious container of *something* that smells rancid.

He checks the cabinets next. Finds one pan, one pot with a lid that goes with both, one plate, one bowl, one pair of chopsticks, and one spoon. He sighs. For some reason, he expected

more. But considering the absolute desolate state of the rest of the place, he should have realized.

Kakashi's apartment is hardly lived in. Hardly a home. Probably no more than another place he can crash before he needs to go out again. And…he's been traveling around with Izuna this past month, so of course everything in his fridge has gone bad. And of course he lives alone and never expects company, so why bother getting more place settings, more things to cook with, more…stuff.

Kakashi doesn't have a couch. That's the main problem for Izuna at the moment.

Because he remembers—somewhere in the farthest corners, covered in cobwebs and sunbleached—a single memory of Kakashi's apartment when he was a genin. When all three of them had gotten so fed up with Kakashi being late that they hatched another hair-brained plot to set up alarms in his home so they could pull the trigger whenever. That day had the three of them trailing Kakashi through a roundabout route around the village. At the end of it, when they were weary, dead on their feet, and starving, Kakashi had spun around and invited the open air inside for dinner and tea. To say they were not happy with being so obviously found out was an understatement.

Then though, he remembers there being a sofa. He remembers the three of them squishing onto it in front of a low coffee table, and Kakashi sitting down cross legged on the floor with a shit eating grin, half assed promises being thrown around about not being late anymore, and how the three of them *really* need to work on their stealth.

So yeah.

Izuna's not exactly sure what he expected Kakashi's apartment to be 6 years in the past. But surely… *surely* it wasn't so unreasonable to assume he had a couch? Only…he doesn't. He has nothing, and now Izuna's standing in his empty kitchen thinking about sleeping on the hardwood floor instead of the fluffy futon Itachi had set up for him in the guest room. But he could see the moonlight through his window, and hear the strong autumn winds that would turn to winter anytime soon. And he'd run when he'd heard that quiet 'goodnight, Sasuke,' through the door.

He could hear phantom screams. His own, somewhere in his head. He could feel blood under his fingernails, soaking into the tatami mats, the smell of iron clogging up his lungs. And he could see it still. Blood. Twisted limbs. Soulless eyes. He'd opened a portal and latched onto the only other familiar thing; Kakashi's chakra, not too far from the compound, and dumped himself into this barren living room.

So now. There he is.

There are three doors in Kakashi's apartment, all on the left side when facing out from the window. The one closest to him, he knows, is Kakashi's bedroom. The next is the bathroom, and the last is the front door. He knows he should probably leave, or suck it up and sleep on the floor. He's slept in worse places than a warm, dry, wooden floor. It's still better than half the fucking places he's slept.

And yet…He knows Kakashi is right there. Asleep in his room, unaware that Izuna has broken into his house. He knows that eventually Kakashi will wake up, probably sooner rather than later.

Izuna avoids the doors, all three, and opens a portal instead. The vortex is silent, a door is not. *What am I doing?* Izuna asks himself over and over. He steps through to the other side regardless. Lets his feet fall onto more hardwood floor, lets himself look around at this place, much more alive than the living room or kitchen.

Kakashi's backpack is thrown in the corner. Next to it are piles of his weapons, cataloged and carefully arranged, scrolls stacked neatly, clothes folded and pressed flat. There's a dresser with nothing on top, a closet with the door firmly shut, a mirror without a speck of dust. Things are meticulously arranged to the point of obsession. Izuna almost gets it, he used to have that kind of organization drilled into his brain. At some point, it became less about being neat and more that he rarely had enough to his name to warrant organization.

At some point, he had an excess of stuff. He just didn't care anymore.

And then there's Kakashi sleeping on a mattress pressed up next to the window, right on the floor without a bed frame or anything like that. How typical of him, really. His sheets are gray, or maybe that's just the slats of moonlight pouring through the window blinds. Eitherway, Kakashi's hair glows bright silver in the light, his face still hidden by his mask. Izuna can't believe he sleeps in it, but perhaps it's for this exact reason. So if, for whatever reason, all his traps and alarms fail, whoever would want to see his face would still have to go up at risk waking him.

At some point younger him, Sasuke, would have jumped at the opportunity to catch Kakashi off guard and rip his mask off. Now though, the thought only lingers in the back of his mind like a fond memory before it's gone again, and he doesn't really think at all when he steps a little closer. It's a little fucked up, honestly, that's what he's thinking. That he barged into Kakashi's space without regard to how he might react, without regard to anything, really.

But he's here, and he's not going back to the Uchiha compound any time soon. Not when he can still see blood dripping out the walls and taste the iron in the air. Everything would be so much easier if Kakashi just had a couch he could crash on for the night. He takes another look around the room. There's nothing that he can really snoop through, though he does wonder briefly if Kakashi reads that trash Jiraiya writes.

He hears Kakashi's breathing stop, then the shuffle of blankets being tossed off, the slight creak of his mattress as Kakashi shifts on it. When he turns back around, Kakashi is awake, staring at him with a wide gray eye. He sits up and scrubs a hand down his face as if it'll rub Izuna out of existence.

"I-Izuna? What are you doing here?" Kakashi whispers at him, shocked, as if there's someone else in the room, as if breaking the silence of the night were the most vile of sins. Izuna sighs, long and heavy, and thinks about what blood looks like when it soaks through tatami mats.

“Dunno.” He shrugs. Kakashi’s mouth falls open behind the fabric of his mask, pure disbelief written all over his face. “Thought you had a couch,” he says truthly, no regard to whatever quiet Kakashi wishes to remain. But perhaps he had the right idea. Izuna’s voice cuts rough and too loud in the shadows, and too bright in the moonlight. His words ring hollow in his ears.

“Thought I had…” Kakashi trails off. The oppressive silence continues on, Izuna wonders if all their conversations nowadays would be ruled by it. Kakashi doesn’t offer anything else though, and Izuna’s never been one for small talk. So instead of talking, he turns forward, takes a step, just to see what Kakashi will do, if he’ll ask him to leave, if he’ll get mad. But no, Kakashi just sits up a little straighter. But then when he realizes what Izuna’s about to do, he starts to panic. “What-” Izuna gets his knee on the mattress and it dips.

Kakashi almost launches himself out the window, looking frantically everywhere save for him. Izuna clicks his tongue to get his attention. “I’m not gonna kill you or something,” He says.

That does little to quell the frantic skittering of Kakashi’s eye, but he does stay put, even as Izuna sits cross legged on his bed, surrounded by gray sheets and stiff pillows. Kakashi’s bed kind of smells like dog. He supposes his dog summons would pile on here as well. Kakashi’s back is to the wall, he has his hands wrapped around his knees, tucked into the corner and as far from Izuna as he can get. Izuna tilts his head at him. “Are you scared of me?”

Kakashi scowls, shakes his head, and looks away.

“You’re mad, then.”

“I’m not.” Kakashi denies it with a shrug of his shoulders. It releases some of the tension there, but it’s too evident that Kakashi’s still mad. About him saying all that bullshit at the meeting. About him failing his promises once again.

“Kakashi…” Izuna starts, doesn’t know what to say, not really, so he just lets the name float in between them. It catches Kakashi off guard at least. He loosens up the grip he has on his legs and lets them cross in front of him instead, hands in his lap. He stares at his fingers instead of Izuna.

Izuna sighs again, feeling his exhaustion down to his bones. All his nerves have been shot with stress the whole day. He doesn’t want any more of it right now. Absently, he picks at the bandages still wrapped around his forearm and thinks about blood sweeping into his skin and bones crushing around his hand. He thinks about how small Sasuke looks, and if he ever actually looked like that. He can’t remember ever seeming that…breakable. Like he could be snapped in two. He twists the end of the bandage around his fingers. It’s fraying at the edges, has gone gray with dust and grime from traveling. He never did end up taking that shower. He’s changed into some spare Uchiha clothes that feel foreign and scratchy on his skin. The embroidered fan on his back is a different texture than the rest of the fabric. He can feel it tickling his spine, even now.

When Kakashi finally approaches him, it’s like a prey animal approaching a great beast, or a great beast trying to placate a scared animal, Izuna’s not sure. But he goes slow, picks himself

up and edges closer and closer until there's silver in Izuna's eyes, a wealth of hair, half a face staring down at his bandages. Carefully slow hands reaching for him. Izuna stops fiddling and waits.

"It…" Izuna starts again, cursing himself because Kakashi stops in his tracks to listen. Izuna screams in his head. "Itachi's house, that's where they want me." He gets out. Kakashi just nods, looks up at him through his hair, his silver eye find his black one. "It reminds me of my house." He says. *It* is *my house. Blood soaks those floors, it's those walls that echo my screams, it's their bodies in that room that we ate in today. It's Itachi standing over them, right there in that room in that house*- Izuna looks away. "Reminds me of my brother," He mutters to the shadow in the corner of the room.

"Younger me would say I'm weak…but" Izuna sighs and allows himself to flop down onto the mattress. It startles Kakashi a little, he can tell by the way he braces his hands beside himself. But then he just sits there, staring at him, with that look like Izuna's not real. "...but I'm just pathetic. There's a difference." He grins to himself and wonders how many times he called Naruto pathetic or weak, not realizing that they're different all together, not realizing that Naruto was never those things. Izuna's strong, ridiculously strong. But he's also this… mess. He peers up at Kakashi, still in the same sitting position as before. "Admit it, you're mad."

Kakashi's eyebrows twitch down just for a second. "No." he denies it again. half-heartedly. Izuna scoffs at him. Then just like that night, only a week or so ago, Izuna pats the empty space beside him. He wonders why he always ends up like this when he's at a low point. At least this time he's not drenched in river water or shivering so much his teeth clack together. No, this time he can actually concentrate on all the tiny shifts in Kakashi's eye when he does as Izuna wishes, as he lies so they're staring at each other laying down, as if that's the most normal thing in the world.

It's not, but it's the most normal thing in Izuna's life right now, so he'll take it regardless.

Kakashi's gonna stay pissed even if he says nothing, even if some weird complex in him refuses to admit the fact he may very well be a little upset at Izuna. "Well," Izuna shuts his eyes to give himself a moment of peace. He remembers vaguely that Kakashi also hates it when he does this. "If you have something to tell me then do so."

"That's presumptuous of you to think I have anything to say to you." Kakashi mutters instead. Izuna can almost hear a smile in his voice, but maybe he truly is being presumptuous. He cracks open his normal eye just a smidge, greeted by that bullshit smile Kakashi's perfected even now. He rolls his eye at him. Almost says *be serious, for once,* as if this Kakashi isn't always serious. It's rare to see him smile at all, bullshit or not. He used to, at the beginning when they barely knew each other, he used to upturn his eye and grin through his mask, like everything Izuna said was a joke.

And then…and then a demon came crashing in through the snow.

Blood and screams and red eyes.

“Now's your chance, Kakashi. Tell me how much of a fucking traitor I am or something.” Izuna mutters. His exhaustion is catching up to him quickly now that he’s laying down. Even if he’s still on top of the covers and all that. *Not like I’m used to that, or whatever,* his mind supplies ruefully.

Kakashi scoffs this time. “Or something…” He says, but he takes a moment to consider. Izuna fights the sleep from his brain. It’s warm in Kakashi’s room, he’s not cold or shivering, he doesn’t feel like the walls are bleeding, all he can see when he closes his eyes is silver moonlight. He can hear Kakashi’s faint breaths, steady and finally calmed down, he can feel him near too. A familiar chakra, not overwhelming at all. He’s just there. One of these days, Kakashi might be ordered to kill him in his sleep, lying just like this. Izuna could care less.

“Do you think…” Kakashi says, quiet enough that it barely reaches his ears. Izuna hums in acknowledgement. “...that maybe one day you’ll trust me enough to tell me your real name?”

Izuna’s eyes open slowly. He studies Kakashi’s face for any signs of deception, for anything really. What he finds instead is what he’s been avoiding all this time. He’s not exactly sure when it started, or *how* or *why* Kakashi started looking at him like that, like he’s *something* instead of a phantom or yokai everyone else wanted him to be. Izuna’s own brows pull down instinctually. He’s used to people looking at him for all sorts of reasons. He’s used to that surface level attraction, that awe, fear, annoyance, everything in between, everything. Everything, and now *everything* shines so clear that Izuna’s not sure exactly what to do with it all.

What would happen to all this *everything* in Kakashi’s eyes if he knew the truth?

Izuna reaches out, catches a tuft of Kakashi hair between his pointer and thumb and pulls on it just a little, mindlessly, just to touch something, just to fidget. No other reason. Kakashi goes still, doesn’t pull away, doesn’t flinch, doesn’t tell him to *cut it out* or *stop.* He just looks, wonders at him as if Izuna is some *wondrous* thing. And Izuna wonders briefly, incredibly selfishly, what *else* would Kakashi let him do?

He abandons the thought as quickly as it comes, twists silver hair between his fingers and watches as Kakashi watches him, greedy for something more. But Izuna can’t give him any more. Not now. Not when there’s still looming threats hanging just out of his reach, and there’s still the taste of ashes in his mouth.

Blood. Screams. Red eyes.

He drops his hand, lets it rest between them. If Kakashi were any bolder he’d take it, but Izuna knows he's a coward and he doesn’t. “If I told you, you’d never look at me the same,” He says, knowing it’s true.

Kakashi takes it in, carefully, like he’s turning each word over in his head and examining all the bits and pieces he can find. And somehow, he comes to the conclusion Izuna had wished he never put in there for him to find. Clumsy of him, really. Perhaps he’s grown too brash.

“Do you…” Kakashi tests his own words now. His eyes dart everywhere, latch onto something over Izuna’s shoulder before he continues. He won’t make the same mistake that

Izuna does. He's careful. "Do you like the way I look at you now?"

And Izuna's still blindsided even when he knew that something like this was inevitable *weeks* ago. And somehow he can't catch his breath. But he's not leaving. He could run all the way to Uzushio and this would still follow him, *haunt* him the way bloody walls and bloodier screams do. He'd be a sorry bastard leaving a paper trail and bells for Kakashi to hold onto while he runs and runs and runs, convinced that somehow the burning in his lungs is from the toll it would take on his body, and not just his heart.

Beating and beating and beating.

But Izuna can't answer him either. All the words, denial or otherwise, get tangled in the back of his throat.

He used to hate the way Naruto chased after him. He used to hate the way Naruto loved him, but he knows now that no one else could've done the same. Not for Sasuke. Because anyone else with half a brain cell would give up, to realize Sasuke's not worth it. Because he wasn't. Not back then. And now he doesn't want to be chased again. He knows he won't be.

Izuna knows if he tries to cut Kakashi out, Kakashi would let him all too easily, and the thought of that happening is enough to close his throat.
Perhaps it's for the best. Truly. Kakashi shouldn't be getting mixed up with him any longer. Not if he wants to keep his head on his shoulders. Not when Izuna's probably going to kill his best friend. Not when Izuna's not worth all the pain he causes. Kakashi should be the one to draw the line between them and refuse to let Izuna cross it as recklessly as he does. And Izuna shouldn't be here either, lying in Kakashi's bed like it's his, invading his space like Izuna owns it, and yet…and yet.

Izuna almost asks, *what do you want, Kakashi?* As if Kakashi would answer him. As if Izuna wouldn't run away if he *did.*

What am I doing here?

So he opens his mouth and the words don't come out. Instead he flips himself to stare out into the dark shadows of Kakashi's room, puts his back to Kakashi and hears a shaky exhale in return. Annoyance, relief, disappointment? He can't tell what it means. "Tomorrow, after the meeting, I'll teach you how to use your mangekyou…that was the deal, hn?" he bargains to the darkest corners of Kakashi's room. Somewhere, there's a part of him that wishes Kakashi will push a little bit.

Better this than anything else.

He can feel Kakashi's hesitance, the tension curled in his form at his back. Not quite touching, but there, a quivering mass of nerves. "But we're not going to Mist." Kakashi says.

"No…" Izuna mutters, trails off as his mind wanders to the scroll Kurama left him.

Kakashi moves, Izuna can feel a hand being planted firmly down on the mattress right by his spine and Kakashi levies himself up again. "Are *you?"* Izuna can feel a silver eye burning

into the back of his neck.

Don't ignore me this time. He takes too long too respond. "You're…" Kakashi stops, takes a breath like he's pulling himself back together, "you've already decided to leave huh?" A humorless chuckle follows. "Should've known, since you've already run from your family."

The accusation stings, especially because that's exactly what he's done. He tries to ignore it, something like indignant fury welling up in the cold corners of his chest. It feels like fire, like ash and smoke and tastes like lightning. For a second, he thinks he can let it die in the air and not address it. The next second he's flipping back around. He must look furious, because Kakashi immediately backs off, tries to stutter out a 'I didn't mean-" but Izuna's too furious to care. He's tired. Kakashi doesn't have a couch. He can't stand the sound of Itachi's voice telling Sasuke 'goodnight.' He keeps smelling blood and seeing corpses at every turn. Kurama's going to Mist and he's gonna get himself killed one of these days and Izuna can't *stop* him. Naruto's not *here.* And now there's this irritating little *thorn* trying to needle him.

Kakashi looms above him from where he's sitting up beside him. Izuna snatches his wrist in one clean sweep and knocks him back to his level. He gets resistance for only a second before Kakashi calms back down again when he realizes Izuna's not about to kill him. There's panic though, in his one gray eye, sharingan staying firmly shut even as Izuna jerks him closer, using the fact all his muscles are locked up to get him there. They're close now, Kakashi's wild hair nearly touches his forehead.

"I ran to you, didn't I?" Izuna spits before his brain can keep up. And then it does, and he lets go as if he's been shocked. He scoffs at Kakashi's dumbfounded face before he looks away, focusing on the moon that's blessedly silver instead of red.

An ugly feeling crawls up to his heart and dies there. "Whatever. Just…go to sleep." Izuna shuts his eyes then, a futile attempt to block out the world around him. There's a horrible tension, he can feel it down to his soul. But he can't smell blood or hear screams or see red.

For a second he thinks he can sense something brush the back of his hand before it disappears again. *Coward.* Izuna thinks ruefully. Whatever little budding flower of warmth is killed again by that poisonous dead thing. Izuna refuses to give it a name. A name would make it all a bit too real. He can still pretend he's the selfish bastard toying with another lost soul.

"Goodnight, Izuna."

He can pretend it means nothing at all.

~Some Art (From Ch.36 Meeting)~

Chapter End Notes

Whaaaaaaa??? Did I have this little interaction planned for a long time? No. Totally not. It's not like I've been planning for them to share a bed, a REAL bed, for like a while now ehehehehehh.

The Here and Now

Chapter Notes

> Hello my lovelies!! It's been a while I'll admit so this is just kind of an throw away chapter to get my writing shoes back on!! It's been in the works for months and yknow, sometimes you just gotta get through it to get to the better stuff!! Not that I think this chapter is bad or anything, but sometimes there are just bangers I will admit, and sometimes there's these

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Politics takes too long. That's what Izuna's been learning for the better half of four hours. It's taken time to really get down to the nitty gritty of the matter Izuna wishes to discuss. After a long and tedious introduction to people and elders he doesn't remember the names to any way, along with all the clan heads first petitioning different, minor, changes to Konoha's laws and regulations, and then all of them soundly putting in their two cents about his sudden appearance, as well as everyone in the room speaking over each other about the fragile truce between Konoha and Uzushio, does he finally get to tell them about Orochi-fucking-maru. Who is a person of interest that Konoha could *actually* help him with.

And it goes as well as one could expect.

"So you're saying Orochimaru is more of a threat than this… fake Madara—the same fake Madara that outright attacked you and killed one of our anbu in the process?" The Hokage regards him with scrutiny. The meeting table is crammed with every kind of authority in Konoha, from a string of elders, to every clan head under the sun, to the Hokage, to the Hokage's advisors, to Ibiki from T&I. Familiar and unfamiliar faces all stare at him intently whenever he speaks.

He gets a certain vicious glee knowing that Danzo would be sitting here, facing him down, had he not slit his throat all those moons ago. "Orochimaru is and will always be a problem. Madara's plans are more…grand. Too many moving parts for him to do anything major right now. Orochimaru's more selfish, therefore he causes small-scale problems in larger quantities. Plus, he's easier to find and kill." And it's not like Orochimaru hasn't also killed anbu in the past.

"You're going to kill him?" The Hokage seethes, "I presume you know just who you're talking about, and to whom."

Izuna's eyes narrow. He leans back in the chair gifted to him, a high-backed thing he's taken to like royalty to a throne, and recrosses his legs. He's not oblivious to how the tension spikes whenever he moves more than an inch. "Orochimaru was one of your students. I'm aware.

Then, as his sensei, you have a responsibility to stop him before he goes too far…and he has gone too far, and will go farther still."

"Orochimaru is hardly any of your concern for an Uzushio shinobi," the old man says, perhaps it's a feeble attempt to appease his bloodlust. "I assure you. He has never shown interest in Bijuu or Jinchuuriki."

And there, Izuna catches Fugaku's expression, the slight twist in his lip whenever Orochimaru is mentioned. The air of disgust that permeates half the room. "Yes, but I do hear that he's quite interested in kekkei genkai," he smiles meanly, "particularly sharingan?"

"That's right," Fugaku barely contains the anger bubbling out of his voice. Those files—" he stops, takes a look at Izuna, then coughs, "there were reports that Orochimaru has been a part of several schemes involving bloodline theft. Not just from Konoha either. He's too much of a wild card. And he's Konoha's problem to deal with-"

"He's not the priority right now." The Hokage snaps, brings his hand out flat on the table to put the issue to rest. "Tell us more about that organization, the ones he's a part of. Surely we should take care of the bigger players before him?"

One of the elders moves, like an old tree branch shifting slightly. Izuna swears he can hear this ancient man's bones creak. He's never seen him before and doesn't know his name either. Only that his face is so wrinkly that Izuna can't distinguish any other features. "Orochimaru's whereabouts are elusive to us," his voice wobbles at the end, "even if we wished to exterminate him, we do not have the means to locate him."

"I do." Izuna doesn't give a second to breathe. "I can smoke him out. Regardless of Konoha, I'll do so. I'm not asking for permission. I'm asking for assistance."

"Is this a personal matter?" The Hokage throws at him suddenly. Izuna hums noncommittally. It gets the interest of Ibiki and Inoichi. Those nosy T&I bastards. They've been paying extra attention to him ever since Tsume Inuzuka took one look at him and said he smelled like a dog.

He didn't portal back into the Uchiha compound at ass-o-clock in the morning for this slander.

"It is and it isn't. I'm aware of his past and potential destruction."

"And you could do it hm? Part of the reason we don't go for the kill is that we can't." the elder from before croaks at him.

It's not a total lie. Itachi would be able to end Orochimaru, surely. His brother is not currently present within the meeting room, but he's hovering outside as Izuna's official shadow for his stay in Konoha. How ironic.

Before his death, Danzo took up too much space in Konoha's shadows. He pulled most of the strings that kept Orochimaru's labs up and running. He's dead now, and all that saves the snake is an old man's sentiment. And fear.

“We should strike soon.” Izuna mutters. He’s aware that his presence in Konoha is like a ticking time bomb. He can feel Kurama’s chakra prickling over his shoulder every now and then, so very aware that he’s running into a fight that could go so badly so quickly. Things always get a little messy when Bijuu fight. Not that Izuna thinks he can’t win, because he could if the battle was to the death—more chakra, more power—but Kurama will be in mist, surrounded by the Sanbi’s element. And Obito. Where has he slithered off since Izuna put a hole in his chest? “Before he has a chance to run off again. And we need to burn him out of his hide outs, all at once if possible.”

“That’s a hefty proposition,” Inoichi finally speaks up. He rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Though I do suppose we’ve let this fester for far too long.”

“Then, should we make preparations for a raid?” Fugaku jumps at the opportunity, already looking at Shikaku, who leans off the wall at his insistence.

Izuna doesn’t really know how to act around him. He knows that Shikaku is going to be the worst to hang around, so he plans to keep himself far from both Nara and Yamanaka. But… they’re useful as well. “Plans can be drafted within a week. It would be…an extensive operation. Only the best of the best will even last a few seconds trying to hunt Orochimaru. Not to mention all the horrors he keeps locked up.”

“I can deal with Orochimaru.” Izuna says, “All I need are his escape routes closed. Put Itachi and Shisui in charge of one hide-out each. Either of them have the skills to hold their own against him.”

The elders all pause at that. An old croon of a woman scoffs at him. “You must be insane. This close to this debacle with our jinchuuriki, and Danzo—have the rest of you forgotten? Konoha can’t just hand off authority to young brats like this, expecting a good outcome. And all Uchiha no less.”

Izuna’s blood nearly boils. “Itachi and Shisui are capable shinobi. No one in your current ranks is better…besides, they can be used as bait-” he ignores Fugaku’s indigent gasp, “-to ensure Orochimaru doesn’t run away at the first sign of trouble. He’ll be curious, he’ll want to try his hand at getting a sharingan for himself.”

“And what of you? Are you bait too?” Shikaku asks him, draws in his attention, and like an idiot Izuna actually looks at him, finds that he’s being picked apart piece by piece by a set of calculated eyes.

“Of course I’m bait. But by the time he sees me, he’ll be dead already.”

“You’re awfully sure of yourself.” Shikaku muses.

Someone in the back mutters, “more like full of himself.” But Izuna only hums once again, neither denying nor confirming. He has gained a tremendous amount of power since the first time he fought Orochimaru. Then again, he won’t have the luxury of waiting for a time when the snake’s at the lowest of lows.

Unexpectedly, he wishes for Kurama to be here to back him up. The thought comes and goes in a flash and leaves him annoyed. He'll have his clan instead. His family, right?

"Then…is this a go?" Inoichi sums up when the room has been silent for far too long. The elders all grumble, none of them are particularly fond of the idea of an Uchiha led operation, the Hokage has been silent for some time. Most of the clan heads seem to be agreeing or on the fence as well.

"I think…"the Hokage speaks up, finally, "I will discuss this with the elders, Shikaku, and…" his eyes dart briefly to Fugaku, who's eyebrow twitches in surprise, "Fugaku…since the inclusion of sharingan appears to be semi-vital to this operation. The rest of you may go for now." He waves them off. "Izuna, are there any Uzushio matters that need to be discussed right now?"

"Nothing as urgent as this," he says, thinking about Kurama traveling off to Mist, about Uteki Uzumaki and her fishing boat, about Naruto and his foxes. About the scroll Kurama has left him. There are so many things he'd rather be doing.

"After this operation, I'll be much more agreeable in the exchange of Uzushio's information for Konoha's resources," He says, as politely as he can muster. He can't help but tack on, "I'm what stands between you and that demon named Kurama Uzumaki. I suggest you remember that."

He sweeps out of the room amongst the indignant gasps and startled laughter and general chaos. He makes it out the doors and down the hall before a shadow falls into step beside him, and then another one to his left.

"Was that really necessary?" Itachi mumbles as they make their way through the building.

"What a way to ruffle a few feathers," Shisui says. His hot and cold attitude towards Izuna is finally starting to level out. Or, Izuna thinks it has. Yesterday had been particularly cold, but today seems to be how Izuna remembers him. "There's easier ways to make enemies y'know."

"Where's the fun in that?" Izuna scoffs. He angles their walking route to the training grounds, but still ambles about as if he's lost. "I've been in that meeting for hours. Why does it take that long for me to tell them, 'hey, your murder snake causes problems so maybe we should kill him?'" He rolls his eyes. "It doesn't matter, in the end. I'll do this with or without Konoha."

Itachi frowns. He's not wearing his anbu gear—something about him actually getting an on-record mission as a bodyguard/guide/make sure he doesn't fuck shit up to a political official such as himself—so he can't exactly hide behind his mask, and Izuna's too accustumed to reading his minute expressions by now. He can't hide from Izuna, is what he's getting at here.

"You're one of the worst diplomats I've ever witnessed," Itachi says to his face. He notices where Izuna's going though, and makes it look as if he's leading Izuna around instead of the other way around.

Izuna's mouth twitches into a smile before he can fight it off. "I'll take that as a complement."

It doesn't take long for Shisui to catch onto where they're going. He shoots Itachi a side-eye that could be missed entirely. "We should go eat something, meetings like that are tedious, right?" Shisui's not exactly *supposed* to be here, but he and Itachi are practically shadows of each other, so everyone's given up on trying to separate the two for non-anbu related missions. It doesn't really matter just how many eyes they keep on Izuna out in the open. There's about three squads of anbu trailing them from two to four blocks away at any given moment.

Izuna's been working out a plan to give them all the slip in the next minute or so. He'll need Itachi on his side if he wants to pull it off flawlessly. It would be much easier if he had an endless supply of chakra so he could just shadow clone his way out of his entourage and be done with it. But perhaps stealth wasn't a good option. Perhaps being obvious about him ditching everyone would be a better plan in the long run.

He grins. It's much more entertaining as well. "I think I'd rather spar with someone." Izuna's got a pretty good idea of where Kakashi is at the moment. Itachi catches his meaning too quickly and whirls around.

It's too late, of course. Izuna opens up his portal the second Itachi starts saying, "Don't you *dare-"*

Izuna grins, flicks him on the forehead, and leaps through the vortex.

* * *

The memorial stone rises like a shadow out of the ground and cuts apart the afternoon sunlight. Kakashi sits before it like so many days before and likely so many days after today. He tends to come here after a longer mission just to wind down and relax…and to tell his friends about his new adventures, the happenings of the world…anything and everything that comes to mind.

Izuna had once called them ghosts. Not the supernatural way, but the way that they haunt his life, in the way that their influence on him shapes him as a person. One more habit, he supposes, that has arisen from their deaths.

"You'd like Izuna, I think," He mutters to them, both Rin and Obito. Rin would like his mystery, his strength, his protective nature over those under his wing. Obito would like his insanity, his sharingan, his power. "He's a bit weird, and that's coming from someone like me. He's not an enemy I'd wish to have. In fact I…" He trails off, not really knowing what to say, how to say it. The words stick to his teeth like gum. "He told me he'd teach me more

about the sharingan, since the rest of the clan is a bit…touchy about the whole ordeal still. I don't blame them. I'm still stuck in the past as well."

He lets his own words hang heavy in the air around him. *What am I doing?*
"Anyway." He stares down at the carved letters of Obito's name. "Naruto seemed happy the last time I saw him," Just speaking his name brings a bitter edge to Kakashi's thoughts. He's happy for the kid, truly. He only wishes that he could've done something sooner. He only wishes *someone* had done something sooner. So it didn't have to get to that point.
"Kurama's…Kurama. It's not a secret that Izuna's the only barrier between us and him. So I hope…" He sighs again. "I don't know what, actually. Maybe I shouldn't hope at all. That's a good way to get hurt, right?" He smiles at his own poor excuse of a joke.

There's not much else to tell Obito and Rin. Then again, there's so much. He wants to talk about Izuna. About his seals and tattoos and his bells and his mangekyo and his weird katana that's just *covered* in memories. He wants to talk about his eyes and his hair and his cloak that sweeps around him like black wings. And the foxes that swarm his feet. He wants to talk about Kurama, a flame, roaring thunder, red fury that looks like Kushina, Uzumaki spirit and all. He wants to talk about this dread that's been building up around him and everyone he knows.

Something's gonna break. Something's gotta break.

He keeps his mouth shut and stares down at Obito's name and tries to think of nothing. The weather is mild today despite the earlier chill and Izuna bringing the storm all the way from Uzushio. Sunlight, birds chirping, only a slight breeze, and the ever-sharp cold that seems to cling to anything during this time of year.

There's a slight shift of something off to his left, like the world stops and starts and splits apart for a brief second and disappears again. It takes him a second to realize exactly what it is. Footsteps crunch on the dying grass from behind him. They approach slowly, but not cautious, more casual than anything. Kakashi tenses up regardless.

Luckily, Izuna doesn't try to break the silence that falls around them. Instead, he walks right up to the stone and crouches before it. Kakashi stares at him, watching carefully as his eye flits from name to name, reading each one. He knows when Izuna finds it. He stops, his mouth pulls into a thin line, brows drawing in faintly. One hand emerges from the shadow of his cloak and he runs his fingers across the stone letters.

Kakashi doesn't want to speak, but he gets the impression that if he doesn't at this very moment then Izuna will move on and try to change the subject later. "What part did I play, in that scheme you mentioned?" He's been thinking about it since this morning after he went through his memories and recalled all the other things Izuna's been promising him.

Izuna's fingers stop, hovering over Obito's name. They wait there, still as stone, suspended in time. Kakashi thinks he's finally done it then, has pushed the last line to push. But Izuna *said* they'd talk about it when Konoha decided not to kill them. "What do *I* have to do with the Akatsuki?"

Izuna withdraws into his cloak, all his limbs vanish into a huddled mass of glossy black fabric, face half hidden by his hair. He keeps his eyes on Obito's name. "You will learn. In time."

Kakashi tries not to lunge forward and strangle him. "Now seems like a good time."

"It seems like the worst time, actually," Izuna scoffs but it doesn't sound like he's joking. He looks up at him suddenly. The fear not so subtly hidden catches him off guard. What does *Izuna* have to fear? "Are you sure you want to know?"

Yes. He thinks instinctively. Then, *no.* his heart screams at him to stop, to take a step back. Ignorance is bliss and all that. Izuna knows so much that he seems tormented by it. He takes too long to answer. Izuna moves on, sweeps himself up in his cloak and takes all of Kakashi's questions with.

"I didn't come here to talk about this. I came here to help you with your sharingan. I'm a little pressed for time so I suggest we get a move on."

Kakashi tries not to roll his eye or look too disappointed. He shelves the Akatsuki discussion once again, and decides to reevaluate what he actually needs to know later. "I'm noticing a particular lack of Anbu on your tail. I assume you've ditched them and they're out looking for you?"

"Them and the two nuisances known as my family."

Ah. Itachi and Shisui. "Wonderful. I'll give it 30 minutes."

"This first part hardly requires me at all. Besides," Izuna lifts a shoulder in a half shrug, "You'll figure it out eventually, with or without me."

"Sure," Kakashi scoffs. He can barely activate the damn thing without wanting to either keel over from the grief, or the sheer chakra exhaustion. "Was your mangekyou just as troublesome or is this because I'm no Uchiha?

"Mangekyou are troublesome, Uchiha or not. But your chakra pathways and reserves aren't naturally built for the strain. Using the normal sharingan has lessened it, but now it'll be like starting from square one again."

Kakashi tries not to let his annoyance at the idea show. Izuna continues on a bit ruefully, "Only this time with the added weight of everything your mangekyou represents."

Kakashi looks at the monument still looming over their shoulders. Past that, the sun shines happily between a part in the clouds. It strikes Izuna in particular. He seems to bask in its gaze like a cat, even tilting his head up slightly and closing his eyes for a second. When he opens them again, the flower pattern of his mangekyou spins to life. "It's not too bad once you get used to it." He shuts it off just as quickly, before Kakashi can really get a good look at it. He faces Kakashi once again. "Just go slow."

"Is that how you trained? Slow?"

Izuna grimaces. So that's a no if Kakashi's ever seen one. "I…well…" He draws himself further into his cloak. He steps into the shadow of the monument and out of the sunlight. There's regret and guilt playing on the half of his face that Kakashi can see before it all is put away behind Izuna's perfect mask. "When I got my mangekyou, I used it so much so quickly I nearly went blind."

"But you didn't," Kakashi says, "I know something's happening. If I need this power and I can't use it because I'm too *slow* on the uptake-"

"No," Izuna cuts him off easily, slices right through his rampant thoughts. "You don't have to fight. It's not your war."

"But I already played a part in it. You said so yourself," Kakashi hisses back, bitterly.

"Your part is done," Izuna snaps at him and Kakashi pulls back into himself as Izuna lashes out. "There's nothing you could've done. There's nothing you *need* to do. It's *my* burden to bear, do you hear? *Mine."* His eye flashes once again before he's turning away from him all together. He starts to walk off and Kakashi's heart lurches at the thought that he's just going to disappear into the forest and never return. But then he's whirling back around and stomping right up to him.

"If you use your mangekyou too much, you'll go blind. I was only saved because I had my brother's eyes transplanted after I'd fucked up my own." Izuna bites out the words like they're burning him. "You won't have such a luxury. But you have time."

"It feels like I'm running out," He confesses quietly. "What about that Madara? He might be a fake but he's powerful. What about the Akatsuki? If they're a problem for you that means they're a problem for all of us, eventually. Konoha doesn't have its Jinchuuriki anymore. We're vulnerable to attack. Kurama showed us that. *You* showed us that." Izuna opens his mouth, surely about to object, but Kakashi cuts him off. "I *know* something's happening. Whether it be Akatsuki or Madara making a move, whether it's Kurama stealing Jinchuuriki and remaking Uzushio, whether it's an all-out war brewing…I have to be ready."

"You will be," Izuna says, much quieter than before. It's strange to hear him talk in absolutes. To talk about *him* in such a way. Like he knows. Like he's seen it. "When the time comes. But those things you speak of now, they're not your burden to bear. They're mine."

"It doesn't have to be your burden alone."

"I know," Izuna's tone is patient, measured. "I'm not alone."

Kakashi's not expecting a tidal wave of despair that crashes over him within seconds. The more Izuna talks, the more he feels like he's losing his footing in a turbulent sea. He knows where this is going. He knows Izuna's gonna leave him behind again, go running off into the snow, seclude himself away behind storm clouds and barriers and fire. He doesn't want that, and that's what terrifies him. He's not enough. He'll never be enough to keep Izuna there, or even to have Izuna choose him to fight beside. Because he chooses someone else. Someone on the same level as him. He should've known.

Kakashi's a fool to ever think Izuna would stay in Konoha. Stay with his clan. With him. He's already chosen Uzushio. His foxes. And Kurama.

Kakashi knows it's not that simple. Not by a long shot. Izuna's not some prize to be won or pet to keep on a leash. He's hardly a person in the way people are. More of a force of nature, a phenomenon. A storm. Chaos in a cloak. He's no right to think he could tether chaos down. Make Izuna his.

"So you don't have to worry about time," Izuna is saying. *As if he has control over such things.* Kakashi's bitterness seeps into his thoughts. He tries to rein it in. It's not Izuna's fault. It's his after all, for not being enough and Izuna just knows the truth better than he does. "There's more of it than you think."

Chapter End Notes

All right so Kakashi I was thinking needs a bit more self doubt and internal angst because yeah its Kakashi and there's no way he's not feeling that inferiority complex right about now, And I reallllllyyy needed to set up actual Akatsuki hunting because that's literally how this fic started and then I accidentally spiraled it WAY out of control. So. Back on track. we're getting there, we're getting there---

In other news! Did you know I'm fucking obsessed with Star Wars and always have been?? I wasn't really apart of the fandom culture until recently after my soulmate confessed he'd never seen star wars so we spent winter break binging all the star wars content (He cried at the end of clone wars, and then cussed me out lmao) Anyway, Star wars fanfic writers like one thing and one thing only; time travel. So. Where have I been these past few months? Uh. Bringing every star wars time travel AU I can get my grubby little hands on that's where. Sorry, I was going through a phase. Anyway. I love Ahsoka Tano I'm pretty sure she was my first gay crush when I was like 8, and I want more time travel Ahsoka centric fics but can't seem to find any good ones soooo...I'm just saying, the reason Im writing this one is because I couldn't find any Sasuke centric time travel fics...

No promises, except I PROMISE to finish OTOS before I start another massive project like this. Also. Pls talk to me abt Star wars if you like it bc I fucking l o v e talking abt star wars

White Dawn

Chapter Notes

> Hello my lovelies!! It's been another hot minute! Uni absolutely kicking my ass like usual but here we go! Last chapter (I swear) before we go snake hunting!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuna spends a week trying to convince them that he's not some grand mastermind liar—even though he certainly is leaning in the direction. He's not a very good liar, Itachi points this out to him several times before he starts fights with his younger self in full view of their parents. *Itachi's* parents. *Sasuke's* parents. Not…not really his. Not anymore, at least. He then points out that Itachi never figured him out until it was practically shoved down his throat.

"The only saving grace is that your situation is so batshit, no one would ever consider it in the first place." Is Itachi's answer, to which Izuna concurs, and inexplicably smiles at the sun for this strange stroke of luck that's been granted to him.

He finds he can't hate Konoha as much as he tries the longer he stays there. Mostly it's due to Itachi and Shisui, who try to show him around to all the cool little nooks and crannies—when he's not busy absolutely *shredding* their kage with his words—as if to say 'look, it's not all doom and gloom.' He still feels it like the autumn wind in the air though, a stab of hatred when he passes by Naruto's old place, or the not so subtle glares he gets every now and then the farther away he travels from the Uchiha compound. He spies the academy once, Naruto's lonely swing looking more desolate as the shadows grow the longer he stares, and decides that he could rip Konoha up from the roots and not care at all.

The next moment he's being dragged off to fulfill his promise of teaching Kakashi more about his sharingan, and the world seems to spiral itself back into place. Izuna's not stupid enough to *not* realize what everyone around him is doing. Distracting, placating, smiling, playing nice as if he's one wrong step away from killing them all.

(He's not that volatile…not anymore at least)

If anything, if Izuna finds Konoha is no longer worth his time, he'll simply…leave. The idea catches him unawares after the fifth night he spends inside his childhood home. It's only the third in a row he hasn't run away from. He's been staring at himself in the mirror above a sink he once remembered needing a stepstool to see over the porcelain properly. Now, he nearly towers too tall to catch the top of his head in the reflection. Izuna tries his best not to look at himself. It's rare he has the means, and when he does, he normally doesn't care enough. A quick look is granted, staring at himself in rippled distortions of a river or lake, or his shadow in the glare of a window. But now he takes a minute to really *look.*

Mostly, the thought about simply walking away comes to him when he focuses on the spiral of scars that whirl around his torso and side like a hurricane cloud. Just thinking about it makes his side ache, makes it burn with phantom pains that he might never get rid of. The skin itself is a gleaming white-ish pink, nearly glowing if the rest of him weren't so pale. A storm that Naruto twisted into his skin, as if he couldn't help but spin his chakra even as he healed him. It's just another mark Naruto left him with. Left him alone and tumbling along into utter chaos.

Resentment for Naruto is nothing new to him. Just that he hasn't felt it in some time now. But it twists and twists inside him, just like storm clouds, just like Naruto's chakra sealing over his skin. He knows these scars are an act of love, something so desperate that it killed Naruto, eventually. Sasuke had warned him early on.

It makes him think of leaving now, because the scar is a storm in any sense of the word. It reminds him of Uzushio, really. And that he has a place next to Kurama, should he wish to traverse the waters once again. That's where little Naruto is, regardless. Even if he resents his soulmate's decision to keep him alive—save him when he could've saved himself—he would never dream of taking it out on Naruto *now.* And Konoha…Konoha has never been his home.

He was destined to be a storm.

In every sense of the word.

Izuna gives himself another second of self loathing before he turns from the mirror, puts on his shirt—a new one with an Uchiha fan and all—and promptly runs into his younger self in the hall. Sasuke, as it turns out, is a headache and a half to deal with. Izuna can't fathom how Itachi ever loved him as deeply as he did, because all Izuna ever feels when confronted with Sasuke is a well of annoyance and self pity. Sasuke doesn't seem to get the memo.

He walks right up to him and grabs the hem of his shirt. "Itachi-nii's making breakfast for us," Sasuke points with his tiny hands down the hall and tugs at him, "He'll get all sad if you're not there like yesterday."

Izuna sighs heavily and pretends Sasuke's puppy eyes don't remind him of a certain *something.* "I have a meeting with your Hokage, I need to go."

Sasuke spins on him, accusatory, "that's a lie, Itachi-nii told me you'd say that!"

"Well your brother doesn't know what he's talking about then," It is, in fact, a lie. He wants to go run off and be sad somewhere where no one would be able to find him. It's something that's getting increasingly difficult to do as Itachi, and *Kakashi* of all people, start to find his haunts one by one.

His statement only causes Sasuke that righteous fury about his brother that has Izuna grinning and his heart aching all at once. "He does too! It's *you* who doesn't know anything about *anything!"*

“Hn,” Izuna hums and allows the tiny terror to drag him into the kitchen and force him to sit down at the table. Itachi has, in fact, made them all a simple breakfast before the day, hopefully one of the last before they run off to their doom. The hokage and council finally conceded to send out scouts and informats to pinpoint Orochimaru’s location after Izuna gave away the location of all his known bases.

“Your plans for the day?” Itachi asks while he slides into the room, as silent and a shadow. Sasuke beams at him, to which Itachi smiles right back. It lasts only a second before his attention lands fully on Izuna again. He pretends not to see Sasuke pout beside him. They’re alone right now, with Fugaku in a clan meeting, and Mikoto desperately needing to buy more food for the extra guest—and Shisui, who's been showing up more and more just to antagonize him.

“I thought I’d go shopping,” Izuna says, picking at the miso and rice set before him. He takes a bite, aware that Itachi is sat there frozen with his chopsticks halfway to his face.

He puts them down before clarifying. “Shopping,” He says. It’s not a question. “You don’t have any money.”

“Hn,” Izuna doesn’t deny it, he gave it all to Kurama before he left. “It appears I’ve miscalculated.” He looks up at Itachi then, and puts on his best sarcastic smile.

“You’re broke? Aren’t you like…some big-shot-politics-shinobi or something?” Sasuke says. Before Izuna can answer he gets a scoff and an eye roll. “What a loser.”

Itachi’s eyes flick between the two of them like he’s seeing double. Izuna doesn’t try to correct his younger self. There’s no point to it.

“What do you need?” Itachi glosses over Sasuke’s comments, much to his displeasure. Izuna frowns at that, but lets it go for now.

Izuna tilts his head, pretending to contemplate something. “I haven’t decided yet. I’d like to look around.” That got Itachi’s interest. Him and the rest love showing off how *cool* Konoha is.

“We can go after we eat. Sasuke,” Itachi turns to him, and the kid perks up immediately, “Would you like me to walk you to the Academy?” Sasuke’s nodding before he finished speaking. “Good, Izuna and I can-”

“You can come find me once you’ve done that,” Izuna cuts him off, knowing exactly what Itachi’s trying to do. But he knows himself better than that. Sasuke wouldn’t want to share the precious little time he has with his brother anymore than he already is. In Sasuke’s mind, Izuna should just stay out of it. Izuna’s inclined to agree, for Sasuke’s sake…and his own.

“Oh…” Itachi seems to deflate, if only vaguely, in the way that almost all his emotions are vague, “I see…You’re not planning on making it difficult for me, are you?”

“Sure,” Izuna gives a half shrug, “You’re definitely getting better at tracking me after I vanish. I’d say I’m doing you a favor.”

“Well…that *favor* is causing the rest of my team a lot of headache and stress.”

“Perhaps they should try tagging me with something next time.” Izuna grins slightly at the exacerbation in Itachi’s eyes.

“They did that already, you shook them out each time and exploded all the chakra seals they tried to put on you.”

“Well. They didn’t ask nicely,” He deadpans.

Itachi grumbles something like, ‘they didn’t ask at all.’ before he finishes up the rest of his food and urges Sasuke to do the same. Which he does, with gusto, as if he also can’t wait to be rid of Izuna’s presence. They finish eating and head out, Izuna follows them to the front entrance. Itachi turns to him before they leave, shooing Sasuke out the door while he does.

“You know…you don’t have to push yourself away from him,” Itachi says.

Izuna shifts his weight, feels a pull on the scars at his side. “I know myself, Itachi.” He says. “I’m not the one who needs you.”

Itachi’s brows pinch, almost hurt flashing across his features before he schools them into place again. “I can have you both in my life. You’re family. *We’re* family. There’s no reason for you to…to go. If…that’s what you’re planning.”

“I’m not going to disappear the second you look away from me.” Izuna says, low, because it's almost a lie. A promise he can’t keep. He’s got a track record of doing just that.

Itachi knows that too. He doesn’t buy it for a second. “I know you can. I know you *will.* Maybe not today but…Eventually, right?”

“Eventually.” Izuna conceded. “But…that’s what Sasuke feels too.”

“What?”

“Once you leave his sight, he doesn’t know when you’ll return.”

“I *always* return.” Itachi denies.

“Okay,” Izuna pokes him in the forehead and uses his finger to push Itachi towards the door. “I’ll believe you. If you can believe me, hm?”

Itachi goes silent, his gaze searching, before he finally opens the door and Sasuke looks up at them. He gives Izuna a particularly harsh glare that Izuna doesn’t acknowledge. The two split in opposite directions. Izuna decides it’s time to go find that lonely corner to mope in before Itachi inevitably finds him again.

* * *

He finds his solitude on the hokage Mountain, resting between the spikes of the fourth's stone head. He allows the anbu squad to keep track of him this time, knowing that he only has about thirty-ish minutes to himself before Itachi comes to find him again. He sits cross legged and tries to meditate for a moment, something that he rarely ever does.

At some point, he needs to learn Sage techniques. Maybe then he could use his rinnegan more. He's been neglecting a large chunk of his abilities because of his limited chakra pool. Though, by no stretch of the word could he say his chakra pool is *small.* But the rinnegan is absurd in its chakra use. He supposes he could ask Kurama- No. Not happening.

Still, he shuts his eyes and lets his other senses take over. He lets the chill roll through his bones, the wind sharp in his ears, tugging at his hair and cloak. The faint sounds of the village comes through, a vague murmur of life. He can hear the faint shuffle of the anbu as well, try as they might to remain still, it's nearly impossible to do so. Life moves, regardless of how much one trains. There's always a twitch of a muscle, a breath, a shift in clothing. He lets himself count the anbu. Only four today. They've steadily gone down in their numbers since the day he got here. He wonders if they'll talk to him. He doesn't try.

Instead, he reaches his senses outwards to pinpoint the few chakra signatures that he's grown familiar with. His own leaps out at him first. Sasuke's at the academy, Izuna thinks, judging from the distance. Next he finds Itachi. He's already on his way here. Then, there's Shisui, who is somewhere in the administration building. His is so clouded, Izuna can barely distinguish it from a civilian, a near perfect disguise. If he didn't know him, he wouldn't be able to tell.

He can also feel an impending rain, which has his heart leaping, knowing that there's only one thing coming straight towards Konoha that can cause such a feat. If he's lucky, Karasu will be back by the afternoon, and bring the storm with him.

Next is Kakashi. Who is…

Izuna fights back a grin. Kakashi is here. One of the four anbu stalking him. His signature is also vague in that way anbu mask them, like a mere suggestion of a person. It's a lot colder than what he's used to. He almost wants to call out to him, but he doubts he'll get a reply. He keeps his discovery to himself.

Besides.

There's footsteps announcing their arrival. Loudly. Obviously. Izuna opens his eyes to Itachi standing next to him, taking in the view, taking in the wind and the cold and the hum of life. Itachi gazes out at Konoha reverently.

"There's nothing you won't do to protect this place, huh?" Izuna says suddenly, surprising himself.

Itachi's head snaps down to him, a fiery swirl of something before it mellows again. Into sadness. Remembrance. He doesn't answer. They both know what he's thinking.

Izuna pats the stone head of the fourth Hokage. “The anniversary of the kyuubi attack is soon.”

Itachi stiffens. “I know. You can…always feel it in the air when it comes around. People get…”

“Angry? Suspicious?” Izuna fills it in. Itachi shifts a bit on his feet, but doesn’t answer. “You know what else happened that day?” Itachi does, he can see it in his eyes the second he understands where Izuna’s going with this. “Naruto’s birthday.”

“So *that’s* what this is all about…” Itachi mutters, his eyes downcast to the village sprawled out below them.

Izuna lifts his knee to rest his elbow on. “There’s a good chance we’ll be leaving within a couple of days. Might as well make the most of it.”

Itachi scoffs. “You just want me around because you know I have money.”

Izuna stands up and dusts himself off. “Yeah. But, that’s what family’s for, right?” He gets an eye roll, but Itachi follows him back down the mountain and into the lively streets of Konoha.

“Do you have any idea what he wants?” Itachi asks idly as they walk along.

Izuna tilts his head in a shrug. “Hn. I’m sure he’ll like anything as long as it’s gifted to him.”

They pass by one of the higher end shinobi warehouses, to which Itachi eyes the jonin grade weapons like they’re perfectly suitable for a seven year old. “Then, what do you want to get for him?”

Izuna frowns. He actually doesn’t know either, he just knows it’s something he needs to do like he needs to breathe. Naruto, his own and the current one, deserves so much more than what money can buy, so much more than what Izuna himself can give. “I don’t know yet,” He moves on, plucking the poisonous shuriken from Itachi’s hands and putting them back on the rack. “I’m sure I’ll find something.”

Like he predicted, an icy drizzle starts after about an hour or so of the two of them wandering around the streets looking for nothing in particular. Itachi gives a sigh, holding out his hand to feel the rain sting his palm. He glances sharply at Izuna, who pretends to ignore him and go about rifling through strange trinkets he’s not even sure the purpose of. The air tastes like lightning and flames and smoke and smells of *fox*.

“Of all the messengers you could have used, it’s the one that can change the weather that you pick.” Itachi grumbles as they take refuge under a tea shop awning.

“I swear he wasn’t like this before. He’s perfectly capable of stealth.”

Itachi’s eyes narrow at the sky. “So you’re saying he’s just being dramatic?”

“I’ve learned that dramatic entrances are their thing.” Izuna smiles to himself. “Foxes can’t be tamed, can hardly be reasoned with, are solitary, inherently mischievous, not very loyal or reliable…”

“And yet you’ve captured a whole skulk of them, bent them to your will without any sharingan or power…” Itachi mumbles, and under his breath whispers, *“Yokai.”*

“I know you don’t believe in things like that,” Izuna says.

Itachi sniffs. “I’m starting to.” He ducks farther into the shop as lightning flashes in the ever darkening sky. Izuna tries to smother his smirk as he follows his little brother inside.

His little brother. The thought catches him off guard every time.

“I’ll ask him if he can tone it down next time, but,” He shrugs, “No promises. I think he’s still mad at you for trying to kill him.”

“I was not trying to kill him.”

Izuna raises an eyebrow. “Sure. You were trying to kill me then.”

“You were taunting me.” Itachi looks away.

Izuna leans away, dreading the direction the conversation is about to go but plowing on throw any way. “Can you blame me?”

“No, I can’t.” Itachi hunches his shoulders in defeat. “It would be much easier if you blamed *me* though.”

“I am blaming you,” Izuna sighs, “For almost killing Karasu, that is. Everything else is…can be put aside.” He makes a series of hand signs; *“Crow” “Hurt” “Tomato”* He shakes his head. *“Black.”*

You did not hurt me.

Itachi’s hands shake when he brings them up to reply, but only for a second. *“Red” “Four,”* He taps his eye, *“Hurt” “Tomato” “White”*

My mangekyou says otherwise.

Izuna clicks his tongue. *“Crow” “Black”* He signs, *emphatically.*

It’s not you.

Itachi sits back in his seat and stares at him, like he can’t believe him. Then he leans forward and signs, *“White” “Dawn”*

Now it’s his turn to stare, his simmering rage flaring to life at such a notion. He can tell the anbu get freaked the second he starts pulling at his chakra, but he doesn’t care. “No,” He hisses out loud for the world to hear, “Not *ever.”*

Itachi looks around, clearly annoyed that Izuna has broken code. He then taps his forehead and signs *"Black"*

You can't promise that.

"I can and I *will."* Izuna snaps at him. "That's why I'm *here.* I'm here to fix it, *all* of it." It's his new curse, a new burden to bear.

Itachi signs the same thing again, twice for good measure as if his message isn't getting through clear enough the first time. Izuna shakes his head. "I'll *die* before I break that promise."

"Don't," Itachi blurts out, almost strangled. "Don't *say* that."

"It's *true,"* Izuna says, "Not just for you. For everyone. I'll die before I fail again."

Izuna can feel the distress rolling through Itachi's chakra like a maelstrom. "You haven't *failed."*

"And *you* didn't earn this-" he gestures to his eye, "-it was my mistake. You're right about one thing, I did taunt you. I was still mad, yes, but my anger was unfair. You'll find that I'm unfair quite a lot," he smiles ruefully, "Say *white dawn* again and I think my anger *will* be justified."

Itachi opens his mouth to contend the point, probably say something to put himself down like they're both prone to doing, but before he can, they're rudely interrupted.

A cat masked anbu Izuna hasn't seen before slides up to their table. Itachi makes a noise in greeting. Clearly *he* know who this stranger is. The anbu gives a short bow, dripping water from their ears. They've clearly come from the outside storm. A scroll is produced from their sleeve. It's handed to Izuna, Itachi is given a second.

"The Hokage has requested your presence immediately." The cat bows again and dashes out the door in a swirl of leaves. Something about their voice strikes a chord of familiarity in Izuna's brain, something so far off and distant he can't even begin to place it.

He snaps the seal and unravels the scroll. It only takes a second for him to read the message, but he goes over it slowly again and again just to drag out the time. His heart sinks a little when he realizes what it means. Judging from the microexpressions on Itachi's face, he also understands. They both set the scrolls down but neither make a move to leave.

Itachi flicks his eyes from the anbu waiting for them and Izuna. "Are you ready to go?"

Izuna sighs. He's been waiting for this moment for almost two weeks. Now that it's here, he wants to do nothing but stay exactly where he is. He looks up at Itachi standing there, half ready to book it out of this little tea shop. He hasn't even figured out a present for Naruto's birthday.

He signs with a smile, *"White Dawn."*

Not Yet.

Chapter End Notes

So I was thinking of sharing the hand sign codes Itachi and Izuna-Sasuke use for their coms but idk, I think there's something fun about keeping the literal translations a secret from you guys and have you figure out the code on your own! Obviously there's not a lot I have concrete but basically the code is a bunch of systems of catagories and BOOM that's the code.

I'm sure you've picked it up by now but I will tell you that "Tomato" refers to Sasuke and that's the best thing I've ever come up with, change my mind.

But if you want me to tell you the codes let me know and maybe I'll put it in the notes of the next chapter!

A Random Lottery of Meaningless Tragedy

Chapter Notes

Ok so hello it's been a second, no excuses I'm just really burnt out!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're leaving me!?"

A stomp of a tiny foot and a growl of a skulk of foxes later, and Naruto Uzumaki collapses into a puddle of tears and red chakra. Kurama scoops him up as he always does, despite his tiny hands turning into tiny claws that scratch at his chest, desperately trying to pry himself away from all the terrible news he brings.

Kurama had said it suddenly, flippantly over breakfast, three days after Naruto's eighth birthday. It has been a bright affair when Karasu arrived with Izuna's gifts. Opening them revealed a feast of Ichiraku ramen, along with a few trinkets Kurama suspected were from Itachi, Kakashi, and Jiriaya. There was a familiar looking frog pouch already filled with coins, a fox plushie with angry eyebrows drawn on it, and to Kurama's surprise…Minato's special kunai. Naruto had looked at him with stars shining in his eyes, and he laughed until he cried.

No one is laughing now.

But Kurama is firm in his decision. He has to be. It'll all be worth it in the end. His siblings were in danger. As long as Obito lives, he'll need to go out into the world and fight for the peace his Naruto wanted and what this Naruto deserves.

"You can't leave me, I just got you!" Naruto sobs into his shoulder, finally giving up on escaping. He succumbs to his fate of being smothered, and rubs his face into Kurama's mane of hair.

"It'll only be for a week or so."

"I've only *had* you for a week or so-" Naruto hiccups. Kurama doesn't bother telling him that's blatantly false, he only hugs him tighter and tries to keep himself together. He can feel the other Kurama poking and prodding at the thin veil between them, Minato's seal perhaps is the only thing that's keeping them both sane. He knows his old self is confused, angry, and terrified of him. He hasn't gone to try and talk to him directly either, the closest he got was like a dream within Naruto's mindscape, where he told Naruto to choose him or Konoha.

He won't risk a direct confrontation. Not until he can figure out how to do so without Naruto's life potentially in the balance. Hell, he doesn't know what'll happen if he meets his

other self. Would they merge together? Will he be trapped inside the seal, absorbed into Naruto's soul once more?

And what of his vessel now? What would happen to his Naruto's body the second he's gone from it? Would it vanish? Turn to smoke? Would he be able to return to it?

Would he *want* to return to it?

He holds Naruto tighter. "We're not safe, Naruto. Not until I root out the evil of this world and burn it all away."

Naruto sniffles. "But what if you burn too?"

"I can't burn," Kurama chuckles. He knows what Naruto means, but it's the least he can do to reassure the little brat that he's not planning on dying. "I'm made of fire, little brat. I'll eat whatever they throw at me and spit it back at them."

"But…But *why* does it have to be you!" Naruto's claws return, digging into the flesh of his arm. He can feel the veil in Naruto's soul twist as his own chakra wells up inside, fueled by Naruto's feeling of injustice.

Kurama flares his own to match, and the other Kurama hisses at him. In every fiber of his being he can feel the rage that pulsates from Naruto's seal. *Imposter!* He's screaming at himself.

Kurama pushes his own will forward. Trying to force himself to calm down. It's difficult, it feels like he's trying to smother the instinctual wildfire of his own soul. *No. Just a mirror.* And that shuts his reflection up. At least for now.

"If I do nothing, then my siblings will die," Kurama says. And that's the truth. "If I do nothing now, then this world we live in will crumble into dust."

Naruto shoves at him, and Kurama relents finally. Around them is the quiet hum of life and the prying eyes of a dozen foxes. Gaara and Yugito already know, and he sent them off to do chores before he broke the news to Naruto. This moment is for them.

"I could come with you." It's said quietly, a whisper Naruto already knows the answer to.

"Not this time."

"I could!" Naruto sniffs, "I'm strong, you know I am!"

Kurama lets his eyes narrow. "No. It's too dangerous. You're too young."

"But I-"

"Naruto." He keeps his voice stern, a tone he never knew he could adopt but there it is regardless. "I'm going alone."

Naruto gasps "You can't!"

“I have to.” Kurama sighs heavily as a fresh wave of shiny tears roll down Naruto’s face. “I’m going to pack for the trip. Uteki will be here tomorrow, once we leave, I’m closing the island until I return. Yugito will be in charge. Got it?”

Naruto shakes his head slowly. “What if you don’t come back? What if…what you leave me here! I don’t want you to leave me-”

“I’m not leaving you, Naruto.” Kurama says quietly, he pours his conviction into his words. How does he make a child understand, even if it’s Naruto and forgiveness is a given, he shouldn’t take this for granted. He has to make sure Naruto understands.

“I’m not abandoning you. I’m going on a mission. Isobu, the Sanbi y’know? He’s been…put under a genjutsu, a curse so powerful he needs my help to break it. If I don’t, he’ll eventually die, and take down half his village with him.”

“And you have to save him…” Naruto grumbles. “But we could all save him together!”

Kurama scoffs sadly. He can see so much of his Naruto here already. He can already see the dream Naruto had in the future taking root. He ruffles Naruto’s hair gently, he’s heard this all before, and he knows how to answer it now. Perhaps he’s always known. And in another life, this lesson would need to be taught to Naruto in the future instead of now. He looks Naruto in the eyes. It’s not just about him either. He’s just the next to break Naruto’s tiny little heart and try to put it back together again.

“Sometimes, people need to go. They need to leave because if they stay then they’ll suffocate. Sometimes, learning to love someone is learning to let go of them.”

“Izuna left us.” Naruto latches onto it immediately. “I know *why.* But *why* does it hurt so much?”

Kurama leans away. “He’s not gone forever. He’ll come back.”

“How do you *know* that!?” Naruto snarls at him. “What if…one day…what if he just *forgets* about Uzushio…forgets about Aka…forgets about me…”

Kurama almost laughs at the thought. He rubs at his tattooed shoulder, almost wanting to annoy the bastard Uchiha because of all this trouble the very thought of him inspires. “Let me tell you this, Naruto, and you best believe me because it’s perhaps the only truth in this fucked up world of lies.”

Naruto leans forward slightly, eyes wide. There’s a lull in his hysteria, and Kurama counts that as a win. “Izuna will never, *ever* forget about you.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

* * *

Kurama looks out towards the sea, his arms crossed in front of him as a chilling blast of wind hits him in the face. Uteki Uzumaki's fishing vessel is a monstrosity of bright, peeling paint and barnacles. She's a colorful figure too, half mad like Uzumaki tend to get when left alone for too long. Her crew are quiet, and she makes up for that by being four times as loud. But there's an air about her that means business, regardless of her swearing and jeering. She's the only one who's stepped foot on Uzushio since it's collapse, most others not blessed with Uzumaki blood can't get past the storm.

He locks the seals up tight when he leaves, and tells Uteki she best go find somewhere to stay while he's gone. She hates him for a day and then he's forgiven. Naruto Uzumaki is universally loved by all, and she understands that precautions must be made to keep him safe. Still, she bitches about it whenever they talk, so Kurama's keeping his distance.

She's only dropping him off to the closest island in Mist. The place is cursed to all hell and back, she claims, and refuses to sail into Mist's territory—which is real rich coming from her since Uzushio is also deemed "cursed" but she sails into that hell just fine.

Kurama agrees that Mist is cursed regardless, just not in the way of superstitions. It's cursed with Obito's wretched sharingan. Cursed with blood and cursed with death.

"The island's not too far from here!" Uteki calls from the crow's nest. Kurama doesn't understand how she can see with all the fog. "It's got a large port-town. You can smuggle yourself aboard one of the trading vessels. Or if you're crazy like I suspect, then you'll run across the waves. I will say, it'll take a day or two just to reach the village!"

Kurama has thought it through. Marginally. He's not going to run the way he does to Uzushio. He doesn't know how far Mist is, and he doesn't know when he'll need all his chakra for a fight. He's got plenty, don't get him wrong. But now is not the time to waste it.

So he scans the foggy horizon, for all it's worth, and waits for land to reveal itself. Uteki's vessel is the perfect cover, so to speak, because she brings along her freshly caught haul to trade. There's nothing suspicious at all about fishermen trying to sell their wares, and thus nothing suspicious about Kurama. Still, it's like ants crawling under his skin the longer he has to wait and play by the human's rules. When did he grow so concerned with how these pathetic creatures thought of him any way?

"Well, this is goodbye then," Uteki punches his shoulder roughly when they make port. "If you die, at least open up the island again? I'd like to go home this month, y'know?"

Kurama takes a subtle step away from her. "In the unlikely event that I don't return, a man who calls himself Izuna Uchiha knows how to open the seals," he tells her. Then he grins, "But I *will* return. Don't you forget that."

"I tend to not put my faith in fuckin' maniacs. But I believe you." She grins crookedly at him, like all Uzumaki tend to do, "You've got something to live for, eh?"

Kurama doesn't answer. He steps off the wooden plank connecting them to the docks and waves a final farewell.

He turns and walks into the mist. Not once does he look back.

Isobu, hang on a little longer. I'm almost there.

The winds here are heavy and cold and wet, something he's only vaguely getting used to on Uzushio. The weather there could be considered mild compared to the chill that sinks down into his very human skin. A little chakra warms him up, but he tries not to overdo it, or he'll start glowing from the inside out. Nothing says *look at me!* like glowing fucking skin.

With a grumble, he pulls the ties on his haori close. He opted for—as in Yugito actually bullied him into it—teal inside of red to try a blend in more as if his blood red hair didn't blow that prospect out of the water regardless. Whatever. He wears the stupid teal colored haori and now he's regretting not getting a cape like Izuna's crow cloak of horrors. He crosses his arms tightly in front of him and hunches down, concealing as much of himself as he can while moving through this pathetic little town.

And truly, it is a sad sight to see. All the civilians look gaunt and wary, with hollowed cheeks and fretful eyes. There's a sadness that bleeds off them. Kurama can taste their fear like he can taste the fog. And like everything in Kiri, the smell and taste of blood is never far. It simply permeates the fog, even this far out from the village.

When he's sure no one is looking, he runs up the tallest building and leaps to the roof. Luckily, there's only a collection of seabirds that scatter when they catch sight of his snarl. Up here, the fog is so thick he can barely see a foot in front of him. He sends out a wave of his fiery chakra, the heat clears it just enough to where he can see each corner of the roof to check that he's truly alone, before the mist creeps back in.

He sits down then, and places his palms on the rough tiles and focuses on the subtle slope of the ground beneath him. Then he closes his eyes and draws his chakra inward, to the mindscape of his brethren.

Instantly, he's greeted with the wall of Isobu's consciousness. Nothing gets in or out of that barrier, it's a black void stretching out before him that is completely endless, while his own mind extends behind him. Recently, his mind has become a meadow of tall grass and wildflowers. His form has also grown more fox-like in here, with his tails and ears now appearing as red and black chakra.

Naruto's body will not hold him forever, it seems. Kurama doesn't know how to feel about that.

Obito's meddling ruins everything! He turns from the void with a snarl and goes seeking out the next closest presence.

Saiken's mind sits at the edge of his meadow in the form of a dark cave. Inside, the cave expands into a cavern. Water trickles down the walls and stalactites. It collects into shallow pools filled with glowing blue algae. There's a constant *drip drip drip* that reminds Kurama

faintly of his time trapped in Naruto's mindscape sewer. After his release, the darkness in his mind shifted slowly. When Naruto died, his mind was a reflection of Uzushio.

Kurama keeps walking until the light from his meadow is completely gone, and that is where he finds Saiken.

The slug squeals when he sees him. "Ah! You've finally made it, brother!" He blows a bubble, it floats to the expansive ceiling before popping on the sharp edge of a rock. "I didn't think you'd get away from your human charge."

"Which one?" Kurama grumbles, thinking of all the little pests under his eye nowadays.

"I for sure thought you'd be using the Uchiha to help with this plight, given you have him under your tails and all," Saiken continues, "I've seen him in your mind's eye!"

Kurama bristles. "He's as wild as you or I."

Saiken hoots at that, his tails waving in glee. "High praise for the *lord* of feral creatures, eh Kurama? Say, I see you've gotten your tails back. When will you break free from that vessel you're trapped in? I know you have the power to do so-"

"Not yet," Kurama contains the snarl in his voice as he cuts him off, "It's more convenient if I stay human-looking. Gets them to trust me more easily." The thought of ripping out of this skin sends a prickle of unease down his spine. This is Naruto's body, the last tether he has to his best friend.

Saiken's eye stalks bob up and down as he regards him carefully. The slug shrugs, if slugs *could* shrug. "If you say so, brother."

Kurama plows on ahead. It itches his skin to talk so much about himself with Saiken. "I will be in Kiri within a few days. Where is your Jinchuuriki and how much does he know of my plan?"

"Utakata knows enough, and he's… safe enough. His sensei is getting antsy. He thinks I'm as demonic as you are!" Saiken lets out a laugh. Kurama catches the nervous lilt at the end. "I fear Isobu's jinchuuriki will try to find us soon, to turn us into Madara's weapon."

"Madara is dead. The one we fight is named *Obito."* Kurama spits out the name like a curse. "He's not a legend. Not a ghost. Not a god. Just a man. Only a man."

Saiken blows a bubble. "A man who can control us."

"Perhaps," Kurama says, "But still just a man."

The slug concedes this point with a slight tilt to his head. "Then what is your plan, O mighty Kyuubi no Kitsune?" Saiken says, mockingly.

"You will instruct Utakata to hide. He'll tell no one where he goes, not even his sensei. I will fight Isobu and break the genjutsu. I don't know much of who his jinchuuriki truly is, but I

hope he's friendly enough. I don't expect Isobu or his jinchuuriki to join me, which is fine. What about Utakata, have you talked about leaving before?"

Saiken leans back, sits on his stubby legs and seems to sag into himself. "I think he would if push comes to shove. In truth, he shows no love nor hate towards his village. But he is close with his sensei. I fear that the fool's paranoia of me, 'the demon in his precious student's head,' will sour that bond, should he act on his fear."

Kurama clicks his tongue. "Fear wins far too often."

Saiken giggles, "You finally speak as if you're wise, Kurama!"

Kurama bares his fangs at his sibling with no threat. Saiken lashes his tails in response. "What will the sensei do to you?"

Saiken is quiet. His eye stalks flick back and forth. "He will try to extract me from Utakata. I think he'll try to put me in a container of some kind. I don't want to go mad like Shukaku. A soul's no open cave, but it's better than a damn teapot!"

"And that will most definitely kill Utakata," Kurama mutters, "Which I assume you're trying to avoid."

Saiken sighs, "The fools make their children suffer to gain power, then other fools make them suffer to take the power away."

"Idiots. All of them."

Saiken blows a bubble. "And yet you wish to save them?"

"Saving them is saving ourselves. If I do nothing…we'll all burn in the end."

Saiken seems to smile, as much as a slug can. "Somehow, I believe you'd still be standing among the ashes."

There's a threatening lump of something stuck in the back of Kurama's throat. He swallows around it and it hurts. When he speaks, his voice shakes. "Maybe. But I'd be alone then."

Saiken's tails still in surprise, but he quickly gathers himself again. "There was once a time where the Kurama I knew would want nothing more than to burn the world down and live alone in the ashes."

Kurama growls away the sadness clinging to his thoughts. Naruto flashes like sunlight in his eyes and he blinks it away. "That Kurama is dead."

"So it seems…"Saiken muses, "So it seems…I wonder what happened to him?" His head tilts curiously. "Truly dead you say?"

Kurama clicks his tongue, caught in his lie. "He is not *me,* to say the least."

“What happened to him, to make him change into this sentimental fox I see before me, then? Perhaps it was this Uchiha-”

“No,” Kurama cuts him off with a scoff, “It could never be that idiot. It’s the human I still reside in, this flesh that’s now my own,” Kurama holds out his hand to Saiken for the slug to examine.

“Hm,” Saiken pulls back after a second. “I see. Time is a barrier I’ve yet to figure out how to break. It would be you to break through eventually, wouldn’t it?”

“Not me,” Kurama corrects again, “You put too much credence to my name, Saiken, it was my jinchuuriki who broke through.”

“You must love him very much to continue to wear his visage so dearly.” Saiken hunches down and pulls his eye stalks close to look Kurama in his own eyes. There’s a sadness that Kurama can feel around him in Saiken’s chakra. “I know your power, Kurama. You could dispel this form and be yourself again. Surely you’ve enough chakra to do just that? Hell, you could kill this body and disperse yourself. Live free once again when you return to life.”

Kurama meets his eyes. “There is work to be done. I have no plans to die.”

Saiken sighs with a shrug. “So be it! You were always a dreamer, Kurama. I’ll tell Utakata to go into hiding, and you go and free Isobu from that wretched man’s clutches! And hopefully, I will see the lake Isobu always talks about in his mind's eye. I hear it’s a wonderful lake.”

Kurama nods, and turns to leave. But a tail slaps down to bar his exit. He glares up at the slug. “What is it?”

Saiken’s eyes shift to and fro. “Perhaps I should not speak of this. But when the day comes and all the work is done, what of your vessel then? Will you let him go?”

I don’t know… Kurama just snarls. “You ask as if that’s what I *should* do. But what do you know of it? How could anyone? You’re right, you shouldn’t speak of it as if you could *possibly* understand.” He lets out a burst of dark, corrosive chakra, right at Saiken’s tail. The slug hisses in pain and retracts the limb, allowing Kurama to stalk out of the cave.

From the echoes on the walls, he hears Saiken’s whispered words. “I know it’s killing you.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok yeah I've wanted another Kurama chapter for a while to catch up on some stuff with him and actually get the whole Isobu plot line rollin and such, and if you're paying attention shits gonna go down around the same time Izuna and the gang go on their little snake hunt

No IRL stuff rn, summer is just summer

And a Series of Near Escapes

Chapter Notes

I LIVED BITCH

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It takes almost a full week for them to reach the hideout Orochimaru was last seen entering. Their intelligence agent promised them that the snake sannin would remain there for a while —at least a fortnight, maybe a month—stating those words came from Orochimaru himself to his subordinate who was described as a teen with white hair and glasses. The news about the kid instantly soured Izuna's mood the second he was told, but what could they do?

The entire six days were a blur of running and icy stand offs between Izuna and Shisui and the rest of their anbu forces. Kakashi did very little to try and break the ice, damn him and his emotional (un)intelligence, instead he focused solely on the mission and hung onto every word Izuna said about The Snake and all the creepy little experiments that could be lurking around in his catacombs.

It's the night before, and Itachi is pulled from his posting around their camp for Izuna's final briefing. Yesterday, the crow Itachi had posted in Konoha popped. The Hokage had sent word that one more operative would be joining the group before they strike tomorrow morning. The news did not go over well with Izuna, who now waited with his head bowed slightly and his eyes raised to the tree line as he hunched himself into his cloak while sitting around the tiny fire he allotted for them to make.

The fact that Izuna was in charge of this mission *really* rubbed some of the older anbu the wrong way. And Shisui, of course, who needled Izuna every chance he got. If Itachi didn't know better, he'd suspect his cousin is jealous.

"If this guys a no-show, we're going in regardless," Izuna says with a particular note of venom in his voice.

"Give them a bit more time before you reveal your master-plan, *O Great Yokai,"* Shisui bows to him theatrically, somehow turning the sign of respect into the exact opposite. Izuna's mouth quirks up at that, but he's quick to smother it before Shisui himself can see. *Damn them both, honestly.* Itachi refrains from rolling his eyes, and instead he peers into the depths of the darkness around them.

Their group contains three squads of four; Birds, Felines, and Canines, headed by Itachi as Crow, Shisui as Cat, and Kakashi as Wolf. Izuna tried again and again to convince them to let him be a one-man cell, going as far as to build his plans around it, but every night when he goes over his schemes the group shuts it all down and sticks him with Kakashi. Shisui says

it's the most practical because Kakashi's not exactly an Uchiha, and therefore Orochimaru won't be as tempted to stay there if it's him he comes across.

Izuna and everyone else knows this is a load of bullshit and Shisui's just trying to mettle in their…whatever they are. Itachi has to refrain from strangling Kakashi in his sleep sometimes when he thinks about it for more than a few seconds. Whatever. It's not like Kakashi knows the truth. It's not like Itachi himself has any right to try and dictate Izuna's life in any way. Izuna is Izuna and he's older than Itachi and he's an adult who can make his own decisions.

He catches Kakashi's expression when Izuna starts talking, even through the mask it's so obvious, and Itachi does *not* drill holes into the side of his head with his stare. He gets caught almost immediately, because despite it all, this is *Kakashi,* and he gets an eye-smile for his glare.

"I'm going to start the briefing shortly. Do we *know* where this guy is yet or are we just praying he'll show up?"

One of their sensors going by Sparrow pipes up from her perch above their camp. "He's close. About a mile north. Should be here soon."

"Hn." Izuna grumbles something under his breath, then he produces a piece of paper that's been folded half a dozen times from the endless pockets of his cloak. Shisui and his squad all lean in eagerly to see what kind of seal he's got stored, and all are thoroughly disappointed when all that's revealed is nothing.

Izuna clicks a pen a second later like he's had it in his hand the whole time (he most certainly did not) and starts to draw.

It takes only a second for them to realize he's making a map of Orochimaru's lair.

Shisui points to a room towards the center, "What's this one for?" The words have barely left his mouth before Izuna wacks the back of his hand with the pen, then continues as if nothing has happened, even when Shisui hisses with a curse and pulls away.

"Wait until I'm finished, brat." Izuna says in a particularly *scolding* tone. *He's been around Kurama too much,* Itachi think's. Even the other anbu in his squad have to suppress their glee with their captain getting smacked.

As the map gets more and more complicated, it dawns on everyone around him that Izuna has absolutely 100% been *here.* And not in a vague way. Not like he stopped by once or twice, but like he's had the time and freedom to explore such a place in depth. Like he's stayed there.

"Izuna…Is there anything you need to tell us about…" Kakashi starts, as if it won't absolutely get his head chewed off by Izuna's impressive deadpan, "...about this place or… y'know…"

"I don't know, actually," Izuna says stiffly, without so much as a waver in his hand. He goes steadily on as if he'd heard nothing. Itachi has already heard what happened to Izuna in his

timeline. But the closer they get, the more real it all feels. Izuna doesn't seem particularly ruffled at the moment, save for how rigid his shoulders are getting.

When Kakashi doesn't push, something remarkable happens. Izuna sighs, and sits up from the map. He pulls both his arms into the folds of his cloak. "There's nothing much to say. I know this place. I know it well." No sarcastic bite, no venom, just…Honesty. Well, As much as he can afford to give. He turns to look at Kakashi. Itachi can't see what his expression is, but somehow it keeps the rest of the questions at bay. For now.

Izuna turns back to the map and uncurls from his cloak once again.

He wonders if Izuna is compartmentalizing the same way Itachi has been trying to do the whole time. If he thinks about it, for even a second, then the illusion shatters and it'll consume him. He's not sure if he can keep it up if he's the one to meet face to face with one of the monsters that had manipulated and tried to use Izuna for his own gains.

By the time Izuna is finished with the map, their last member arrives at the edge of Izuna's illusion seals. Sparrow whistles sharply.

Izuna stands. With a sweep of his cloak, he gestures to the map. "Memorize that," He says it like a command. Itachi can tell that Shisui's thinking about retorting, but he manages to tug on Shisui's sleeve before he gets the chance. Itachi swirls his eyes to life, feeling a sharp tug somewhere in his mind telling him to dive deeper into the pain and misery. He ignores it, knowing exactly what's hiding behind the veil he's constructed in his mind to block it out. The map only takes a second, but he goes over it a few times just to make sure he gets *every* detail in the large sprawl of confusing tunnels, rooms, and passageways.

When he's done, he looks up just in time to catch the last hand sign Izuna uses to rip open a tiny sliver of his barrier, and a shadow darts inside. Itachi recognizes him instantly, same with Kakashi and Shisui, who both make quiet noises of surprise at the newcomer's mask.

"Tiger!" Shisui darts over to him and rushes him over to the fire, not without a bit of protest from the other kid. He keeps looking over his shoulder as Izuna seals up the barrier again.

"Who's the new guy?" Tiger asks carefully. "I wasn't aware there would be non-anbu on a mission like this."

Once Tiger is sat down, Kakashi passes him the map. "You've been away from the village for too long."

"Not true," Tiger mutters. "I come back to find my squad? Gone. Danzo? Dead. Jinchuuriki? Gone. They send me back out again, then I get a hawk telling me to turn around and head towards *Orochimaru?* Me> they want *me* here? When did the world get turned upside down?"

Shisui jerks his chin at Izuna, who is just plopping back down next to Itachi. "Ask *The Yokai* over there."

Izuna, to his credit, is not phased. But then Itachi notices he's making a sign to indicate a question. It takes him a second to figure it out, but when he does…he's a little surprised Izuna doesn't know who Tiger is.

It doesn't take very long for Izuna's expression to form some sort of understanding once Tiger explains his wood type. Not like there's any other known wood type users in Konoha right now.

After Izuna has a basic rundown of his skills, he gestures for the map back, and the final pieces of the plan are put into place. Izuna shows them the exits and points out all the important rooms, and even the layout of the air ducts, though they're all too small for humans to get through. That's something they'll have to look out for, because—apparently—Orochimaru can turn into a bunch of chakra snakes.

"The squads will remain as they are, Tiger will go with Sh-I mean-Cat. I would still like to go alone-"

"Overruled." Itachi, Shisui, and Kakashi speak at once. The rest of the anbu nod decisively.

Izuna's eyebrow ticks and Itachi knows that they're in for an earful. "There are four exits and three squads," Izuna starts off. It's reasonable, Itachi will give him that. "Three squads, four exits. Once that slimy sonofabitch realizes he's trapped he'll go for any out he can. Above all else, his life is his top priority. It doesn't matter if we kill his underlings or burn his research to the ground, as long as he lives, that's all he cares about. We cannot just leave a path for him to run to."

"Okay." Shisui nods, Izuna's eyes narrow skeptically. "You're still not going alone."

"You all would slow me down."

"That's not very nice." Shisui puts a hand to his chest like he's shocked.

"I can go with you," Tiger says easily. Even with a mask, Shisui can't hide his indignant betrayal. But what did he expect, really?

Izuna's mouth does a funny thing where it's like he can't make up his mind whether to sneer, smirk, or snarl at the idea. "You will *definitely* get in my way."

"Doubtful." If he realizes it was an insult or not, he doesn't show it. Not even to Itachi's eyes.

"I work alone."

"That is fundamentally untrue," Itachi mutters. Izuna side eyes him for just a moment before he continues on.

"If you slow me down I'll dump you back into this camp, got it?"

Tiger and Shisui exchange a look then, something that's so brief that Itachi nearly misses it.

“Then I just won’t slow you down.” Tiger agrees.

Izuna smiles wickedly, like Tiger’s made a deal with a demon. Perhaps he has. “I’ll hold you to that, *Tiger.”*

Before they all retire for the night, Izuna gathers them one last time. In his hands are bundles of seals. Shisui and Itachi both study them with narrowed eyes through their masks. Itachi copies the design down easily, but he can’t make heads or tales of the thing. All he knows is that he can feel their power, even without touching them, and they thrum with Izuna’s chakra.

Izuna divides them up between the three captains and himself. “Place these along the any junctions, doorways, and passageways...everywhere really. Space them evenly. Use *all* of them.”

“What are they for?” Shisui asks forever skeptical, but he takes them when offered.

Izuna’s smirk is subtle and wicked. “They’re...alarms. They’ll alert me when someone walks past them,” He points to a little symbol towards the top that Itachi’s never seen on any kind of seal—not that he’s an expert in that particular field— “...this means I can catch a glimpse of the chakra signature so I’ll know if it’s that snake bastard or not,” Itachi's got a feeling that he's not telling the whole truth, but he moves on too quickly for him to really get a concrete idea of it. “And *that-"* He gestures to a more familiar character that Itachi has *definitely* seen somewhere. "-lets me summon myself to its exact location.”

There’s a ripple of shock throughout the camp, and Itachi knows exactly what's on their minds, because it’s on his too. He's seen that seal before because it's like *Minato Namikaze's.*

Like the Fourth Hokage.

* * *

Izuna creeps along the branches like a shadow. With his stomach pressed flat against the rough bark, he inches himself forward at a snail's pace, slowly, slowly, crawling towards their mark. Many of the entrances to Orochimaru’s lair—this one in particular—are well hidden among the thick swathes of trees and even thicker underbrush. The one he and Tiger—or show he say, Tenzo—have picked for themselves is hidden in the center of a cluster of large, mossy boulders. Izuna would not put it past the paranoid snake to leave a guard within the deep shadows of the rock formation.

Perched on Tenzo’s back is one of Itachi’s crows, which they will pop when they’re in position to strike. The go-ahead signal is Itachi sending up a whole swarm from his central location at the main entrance.

Izuna’s still not happy with the fact he got shackled with this *kid* of all of them. He should have put up more of a fight, but he knows that none of the Konoha dogs would allow it regardless of the fact that he’s their leader for this mission. When he’d griped later that night to Kakashi about it, Kakashi had smiled and said, “You’re the leader *on paper.”*

And wasn't that just great.

The kid's not bad. He's quiet and polite and Izuna can't help but hate him. Just a little bit. The fox in him wants to mess with him so bad, he can feel the urge to say something unhinged just to see if he'll squirm. But he doesn't. He knows Tenzo's not telling the whole truth whenever he talks to Izuna. He knows he's been sent here to fuck up his perfectly good plans, but it's not like he can really prove it besides the general *I don't like you* vibes he's getting from the kid.

So whatever. Tenzo's with him. Izuna honestly wouldn't be surprised if half the anbu were given secret side quests to complete during the raid. Like quickly pocketing a notebook full of experiment logs or jutsu research scrolls.

Izuna will burn it all down with any thieving anbu with it if it means Edo Tensei dies with the snake bastard once and for all.

Tenzo makes a sign to get his attention. Izuna nods curtly. They're ready.

The crow explodes with a silent *poof* of smoke, and now they wait. He can feel prying eyes on the side of his face, but Tenzo's too much of a professional to say anything right now. Izuna's glad for that at least.

The waiting is almost worse than fighting itself. All his muscles stay tensed as they keep their eyes peeled for the eventual black cloud of feathers from between the branches. There's also an abort signal, which will come in the form of a fireball. Much more distinct, but the only reason they'd abort the mission this late in the game is if someone's position gets compromised.

So they wait for the crows to caw.

Izuna keeps one eye to the sky, and with his miniscule sensory abilities, he tries to seek out the number of guards waiting for them between here and the door. Tenzo is also doing something. It takes Izuna a second to realize he's shifting the branches of their trees ever so slightly closer. And if Izuna looks to the ground, he can see the faintest ripples as roots grow and weave their way towards the boulders. Izuna see's the tip of a shinobi's shoe poking out from beneath the shadow of the rocks, and he zeroes in on it. Carefully, he pulls himself to a crouch, unsheathes his katana, then looks at Tenzo.

"Here. Ready." He signs in Konoha's anbu, a move that has Tenzo tilting his head. But he gets the message and plants himself more firmly in his spot. *Good.*

And then he hears the flap of a dozen wings. His head snaps up to the sight of crows.

Next, his rinnegan spins and he latches onto the foot of the guard. Within a blink, he swaps their places, finding himself face to face with another startled man. He falls first into Izuna's genjutsu, and then onto the blade of his katana. It all happens within a microsecond. When he peaks his head back out, he sees Tenzo reeling the other guy's body back up into the trees in a tangle of wooden vines.

Once the body is hidden, Tenzo body flickers down to him, and the two silently walk into the depths of Orochimaru's lair. Izuna makes sure to slap down one of his seals and puts down two for good measure.

The kid's on edge. He's on edge in a way Izuna never thought he would be. The way his steps stiffly betrays some sense of fear in him. He wonders if it's Orochimaru's jutsu, the way he likes to weaponize his killing intent and people's fear, or perhaps he just doesn't like to be underground. Perhaps it's something else entirely that Izuna didn't pay attention to when he was still Sasuke.

They don't run into anyone for a few minutes. The tunnel goes straight and down with no branching paths, the walls dark and rough, with only the sounds of humming, nearly burnt out fluorescent lighting to keep them company. Izuna can hear their breaths. Tenzo's hitches whenever they pass by an empty side room or open door. He swears he can hear it when his muscles tense and creak like trees, like something old moving in the wind beneath his skin.

The tension never leaves as their tunnel starts to twist and branch. Izuna places his tags on the different paths and presses on.

The sound of footsteps stills his heart. He pulls a fist up and Tenzo stops in his tracks, allowing him to creep forward. There's a junction of several corridors up ahead. If they keep going straight, they'll be in the first large chamber room, where Orochimaru keeps one of his labs and some security feeds.

Izuna blends into the shadows on the wall and peeks around the corner. Two shinobi, dressed in a way that betrays their allegiance to the snake sannin. They're walking away from him. Izuna puts them down regardless, kunai to the back of their necks before they can scream.

Neither of them spare a second glance to the bodies after Izuna lights them on fire. Once they're nothing but piles of ash, he scatters them to nothingness.

Up ahead, the paler, colder light of a lab room spills out over the floors and infects the walls with its harsh glow. Izuna grips his katana tight, his sharingan spinning fiercely to catch even the slightest of movements. He could spot a gnat from a hundred feet away like this. Nothing is getting past him.

A needle. It flies through the corridor faster than normal eyes can travel. Izuna cuts the thin metal in half before it can pierce Tenzo in the neck. He doesn't bother to check if the kid's alright, just rushes ahead before their attacker can get away and sound the alarm.

He bursts into the room like a phantom and zeroes in on one lone figure among rows of cadavers, all in a state of dissection. The person scrambles back towards a seal on the wall, most-likely an alarm, but Izuna gets there first. A flurry of needles are hurdled his way and he deflects them on his katana with ease.

"Wait, wait! I'm just a medic!" Izuna doesn't buy it for a second. The person is a kid, a teenager with gray hair and glasses and his name is Kabuto.

Izuna's face twists into a snarl as he continues to advance. The kid scrambles, loses his footing and lands hard on the ground, he puts his hands up but Izuna would be a moron to think he means surrender. He flicks his katana against Kabuto's neck. "I don't believe you."

"I swear! I just do what I'm told to…" Kabuto's eyes flick to Tenzo as the anbu lurks over Izuna's shoulder.

"Where is Orochimaru?" Izuna ignores his pleading in favor of pressing the blade further against his throat. At least the fearful shiver isn't a lie. But Kabuto hesitates too long, and Izuna has no patience for the snake sannin's little *pets.*

Izuna crouches down to Kabuto's eye level. The kid's smart and stubbornly looks down at his own feet. He can hear him grind his teeth. "I won't ask again-" A pinprick of pain blooms in his thigh, he looks down to find a cluster of needles stuck in him. Tenzo's branches suddenly burst forth, twisting around Kabuto's entire body and pinning his arms to his side.

Izuna plucks them out one by one. *The kid actually stuck me.* He can hear the shocked gasp as he stands back up. "Those don't work on me," he says, twirling one of the needles between his fingers, "Should've gone for the physical paralyzing points rather than relying on Orochimaru's poisons."

"How…Who are you?" Kabuto hisses at him, still trying to worm his way out of the roots that snare him. Tenzo responds by twisting them tighter until he stops.

Izuna snaps the needles and scatters them. "It doesn't matter who I am. Tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you scamper off with your head intact."

Kabuto, to give him credit, sneers at him and spits Izuna's words back in his face. "I don't believe you."

Tenzo curls his fist tighter, and the branches constrict. Kabuto coughs, his struggling futile as they creep up further and further, nearly encircling his neck. The kid thrashes about, his eyes squeezed shut.

"We're wasting our time with him," Tenzo mutters, "Kill him now and lets move on." Izuna has no love for Kabuto. But he's young and stupid, and there's a voice somewhere in the back of his head telling him what he's about to do crosses a line. Naruto sure would be disappointed in him for killing a kid.

What of the guard? What of the others? What of all the others? Were they- He shuts out his doubts. He's not a good person after all.

Izuna clicks his tongue. He presses his katana against Kabuto's throat once more. "We're late as is. Let's make this quick," he raises the blade, and Kabuto's eyes flicker open for just a second.

Hm. Got him.

One genjutsu later, Izuna has what he needs, and portals Kabuto to the entrance of the hideout, daydreaming about becoming the greatest medic the villages have ever seen.

While they're running off in the direction of Orochimaru, Tenzo gives him an odd look from behind his mask. Izuna tries not to acknowledge everything that just happened. Sparing one life while he took out four others already…logically, it makes no sense.

"That was an odd act of kindness," Tenzo says when they clear another room without running into any guards. "Letting that shinobi go, even when he stabbed you full of poisoned needles…he wanted to kill you then."

Izuna doesn't look back. Room after room, tag after tag, he can sense they're getting close. The thick, creeping chakra of Orochimaru chokes the very air they breathe. "Perhaps he'll think twice next time," is all he can think to say to that.

Tenzo goes silent. His agitation seems to grow the closer they get, so much so that each of his steps seems to drag. They're nearly there, Izuna can practically taste the fear on his tongue.

One last turn, and the doors to the main lab stand there, just waiting. They climb up onto the ceiling, cloaking themselves in chakra and shadows. Izuna plants tags all around the doors, laces seals up and down the corridor, across the floor, stretching to every crevice he can think to cover. All for that snake, all to contain his wretched chakra from jumping ship and becoming lost in the chaos.

He's almost done when they hear it, the snap of a door opening and the hiss of Orichimaru's wretched tongue.

"Ah…" The snake snarls, "What an occasion…why are rats crawling around my lab?"

Izuna grabs Tenzo's arm then—he almost gets stabbed for it, the kid is shaking—and throws them both through the wide double doors. Right into the snake's den, and there is Orochiumaru himself, in all his terrible glory, snapping his head around to face them. He's dressed in his usual fair, no Akatsuki cloak in sight, and the familiarity of it all has Izuna sneering. Opposite of them are Kakashi and his squad of anbu posted up by their exit.

He signs at them quickly, the sign he taught them for *Thunder* that conveys their seals have been laid. Kakashi signs it back in confirmation just as Orochimaru zeros in on Tenzo, whose whole body goes rigid in Izuna's grasp.

"Holdfast," Izuna mutters to him as he lets him go, "he is only a human."

Orichimaru's slitted pupils train on him next, they don't meet his eyes like any self respecting sannin, and his face morphs from annoyance to delight. *"Oh,* I've heard the stories about you," he says, and it sends a cold shiver down Izuna's spine. The way the sannin looks at him now…it's the same as all those years ago. "Is that what this is? Has Konoha given me a gift of you?"

The old flame of hatred that Izuna has tempered to a pulsing, steady beat of his heart now rages.

He lets the tip of his katana drag on the dusty ground as he takes a step towards one of the other exits. He can sense Itachi's squad rounding the corner of their hall to his left, so he angles himself at the currently undefended exit. "I'm afraid it's the other way around," He says, his own voice seems to shake loose the fire within him. He can feel all his chakra hum under his skin, it all comes to life in the moments before a fight.

"It was almost too difficult to convince your sensei of your much needed death. A sentimental old man, that I'm sure you'll agree with me." Izuna taunts. He paces towards the right just as Itachi bursts through the opposite door. Orochimaru's attention wavers, pulls towards the commotion and he gives a raspy chuckle when he realizes who is at the door. his feet shift subtly towards the one he believes is void of any waiting shinobi.

Where were Shisui and his squad, any way? A flare of unplaced annoyance sears through him at the thought of them getting themselves lost. There should be no conceivable way Shisui took a wrong turn. Not when Orochimaru and the rest of them bleed their killing intent into the air like a thick fog.

"I believe this is a gift. So many Sharingan, just *waiting* to be picked. I hate to disappoint you, and my foolish sensei, but it seems you're lacking the men to defeat me." Orochimaru sweeps his gaze across their gathered forces, He's still careful with the sharingan wielders, keeps his gaze low, just not making eye contact. Still, half the anbu go still, paralyzed by his killing intent alone.

Izuna has not been deterred by his weaponized chakra since he was a child, and living with A jinchuuriki—with Kurama—has grown him familiar with what *true* power feels like.

Izuna scoffs at the sudden realization, and Orochimaru's eye twitches. "These Konoha dogs are here to guard the doors for me," He grips his katana more firmly, the images of Naruto's fox and Sakura's branch of blossoms a sudden comfort to him. He walks slowly, circling around the room until he's placed himself between the snake and his way to freedom.

It was this man who led him astray. Who fed his hate until he gorged on it, until he knew no other taste. And these people—his precious people who were no longer living save for the engraved metal of his katana's tsuba, the charms under his palms, the single bell that tolls for no one—were the ones who brought him back.

He raises the blade. "I will be your death, Orochimaru."

"Hah!" The snake hisses. "Don't get ahead of yourself now." And then he lunges forward, so fast Izuna only blocks the blow with his own preemptive swing. His katana catches fangs mere inches from piercing the skin of his neck.

"You wish to curse me with your rotting chakra?" Izuna can't help the bitter laughter that lashes out between his words. He twists his blade out from Orochimaru's jaws and slashes down towards him again, forcing the sannin to retract his neck. He doesn't get a second to speak as a hundred snakes burst forth from his sleeves, each with a blade of their own. The snakes spread out, attacking each anbu in a massive wave. Izuna quickly pulls his susano'o just as the first snakes reach him, and they hiss and spit and die as they try to break through his shield.

Tanzo's wood release creates a wall around himself, and Kakashi creates a small mudslide that deflects all the creatures away, while Itachi rolls out a massive wire of shuriken and nails every snake in the head. Orochimaru hardly pays them a second glance as he watches Izuna with a gleam in his eyes. "Oh, to have your eyes…" He laments suddenly, as if Izuna hasn't heard the same sentiment over years.

"Oh, to have my eyes," Izuna mocks back, "But not the pain it takes to gain them."

Orochimaru's lip curls, "What do you know of pain, *boy?"*

He does not not the taunt get to him. Not yet. Instead he signs to Itachi, and his brother confirms that he seals are set. Now, they wait for the last squad to arrive. Orochimaru does not wait idly though. He doesn't get a second to breath before he's being attacked again, this time with a water technique that fills the whole lab up to his ankles and threatens to keep his feet stuck to the ground. His susano'o doesn't allow for such a trick to work, but that does not save his companions.

He snaps a kunai across the room just as a viper lunges for Kakashi's leg, the thing dies squirming, pinned through the stomach. He hasn't got Itachi's aim for quick deaths. Kakashi rolls out another wave of mud that absorbs the trapping water back into the ground.

"Your fight is with me, no other," Izuna calls to him before he can attack another.

"As if these hounds won't pounce the second I turn my back to them. Orochimaru leers at them, extending the length of his neck to keep them all within his view.

"They're trained to follow my command, and that's what they'll do if they wish to live." He can see the question and the fear that flashes in all the masked faces that swivel towards him.

In the back of his consciousness, he can feel the last piece of the puzzle fall into place.

Shisui appears at his back, along with his squad of anbu. Shisui is signing *thunder* before he's even asked. Everyone is here now. *Everything is in order.*

"You asked me what I know of pain," he says, a sudden peace befalling him. He calls to the seals, every single one of them. He picks them out, feels them respond in kind. "I watched the world burn and die around me."

Izuna flicks his last seal between his fingers. And he knows Orochimaru recognizes *something* within it, because for the first time, his eyes flash with fear. "What did you-!" He lunges.

Izuna opens up vortexes behind each squad of anbu and Tenzo. With his sword still clutched tight with his thumb, he holds out his hand. " *Almighty push."* He shoves them away, *through,* sends them tumbling out to where they cannot interfere. He spots Kakashi's look of bewilderment, of realization, then of that flash of betrayal that twists Izuna's heart until he looks away. *I'm sorry. I'm a liar.*

At the same time, he flares his chakra brighter, twists the fire within the seals darker, to black.

He slams the seal down on the ground and it bursts alive. *"Ignite."*

Chapter End Notes

ANYWAY!!! I've been meaning to get into more fight scenes but at the same time that paralyzed me for the whole semester not to mention I'm so damn B U S Y and I had MOST of this chapter written like a month ago but the ending and the strategy and everything were just not pullin together until now and NOW it's good enough to actually be a top tier cliff hanger contender in my book!

So whoops it took me a long ass time to get going again but here we are my lovelies!! And do not cry about the art! I'll make more, I promise!!

IRL STUFF:
I'm a senior is college now, which I have like negative time, but I'm really getting into all this jewelry stuff and I think that's where my brain is really really really heading and thats super fuckin exciting!! You won't believe this but in the middle of the semester my prof just dropped some lore that he used to work for mattel and designed barbie shoes??? Fuckin bonkers.

One of my friends got cancer :) and you will not believe what kind :) It's Sarcoma. If you know...you know. She's fine right now though, she got the surgery she needed and so far it looks as if they removed everything they needed to and it didn't spread, She's doing fine but she won't be able to walk for a bit.

Anyway! MERRY CHRISTMAS!

Part-Time Soulmate, Full-Time Problem

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kakashi resigns himself to the moment of disorientation as he and his entire squad get flung into Izuna's vortex without much grace or mercy. He catches Izuna's eyes—both of them—as he's pushed through. Sees the pain and fury and 'forgive me' in them, right before the swirling mass of black shadows and ripped time closes and they're left suspended in limbo before being shot out on the other side. Kakashi manages to barely flip himself and land heavily on his feet, catching a member of his wolf pack and righting them as well before the last two members bowl them over again. He can't pick himself up in time as two more squads get dumped in similar fashion, then Tenzo's tiny form getting plopped down right on top of all of them.

Shisui sits up on his elbows just to yell into the forest, "That fucking liar!" just before the ground directly in front of them explodes.

They get no warning, only a half second as the ground rumbles before it turns into a black vortex of hellish flames. Kakashi grabs Tenzo by the stiff armor plate of his anbu vest, and he leaps away from the flying debris before a thought even crosses his mind. There's only adrenaline that rushes like fire and ice in his veins, anything to get away from the pillar of darkness that scatters heat across his skin.

The next second, he's joined in the surrounding trees by the rest of the anbu squad, all of them mildly unscathed save for Shisui's cat mask now blackened with soot and cracked down the middle…and he's gripping Itachi's arm brace like a vice. It takes Kakashi another second to realize that Itachi, calm and collected Itachi, is on the verge of a freakout by the way he's tugging and ripping himself away from them like his very life depended on it.

"Don't be stupid, Itachi!" Shisui is snapping at him as their feet touch the ground. "If he wanted us to fight with him, he would have told us the plan!"

"Of course he would do something like this-" Itachi is muttering, totally ignoring Shisui's warning. He turns to his cousin with what Kakashi can assume is one of his mighty glares that he only reserves for emergencies. That seems to get Shisui's attention, at least. "You don't understand!" Itachi is saying, "He doesn't care about his life!" The truth lurches Kakashi's heart, "He's a stupid, reckless idiot and he's gonna get himself killed and I *can't* let that happen!" He finally frees himself—or does Shisui let go?—and shoots off into the black flames.

"Itachi!" Shisui yells after him. He looks around at their gathered forces, soot covered and still trying to catch their breath from the sudden rush for their lives, then he prepares to leap in as well. but Kakashi is quicker.

He snatches at him the same way he did to Tenzo, and Shisui hisses as he reeled back in. "You can put out those flames?" Kakashi forces his voice not to shake. There's something

crazed about the way Shisui looks at him, his sharingan spinning like a blur. There's a red tinge to the whites of his eyes, the beginning of a strain.

But Shisui nods, sniffs, and pulls off his cracked mask. There's fury written all over his smudged face. "I can put out the flames, but only for so long."

Kakashi lets him go. "Carve a path. I will follow. The rest will stay, create as much of a perimeter as they can."

He nods, and the two leap back down to the ground. Kakashi had never seen flames like these before, but he can tell they're hotter than normal. The darkness sucks in the light instead of creating it. He places a hand on Shisui's shoulder as his guide, and the two step up to the flickering black crater Izuna has made. The ground abruptly turns down about ten feet where the explosion happened—where Orochimaru's tunnels used to be—but even then, the flames climb almost as tall as the surrounding trees.

Shisui takes a breath, then he does something that Kakashi can't see, but a patch of the flames retreat. "Hurry," Shisui says as they rush forward, "I can barely keep them at bay, They're Izuna's flames, not mine."

"How did Itachi get through?" Kakashi hisses above the dull roar. At his back he feels a familiar shadow, but he doesn't dare whip around to scold Tenzo for following them.

"I don't know! He would need…I…I can't *believe it.* They're liars! Both of them!" Kakashi knows. Kakashi knows so much his soul aches with it. He's never heard this much bitterness in Shisui's voice before, and it worries him suddenly, that the rift Izuna's been causing between the two other Uchihas is a lot bigger than he thought.

"He would need a *mangekyou* sharingan, And that night, That night after Madara attacked us and you went off with Izuna-" Kakashi remembers that night vividly. "-But he was just sitting there! But then… *but then…!"* Shisui makes a frustrated growl, and a second later they're bursting through to the other side of the inferno.

Instinct allows him to deflect the white snake that lunges for his throat before he's even fully aware of the situation playing out before him. He doesn't get the luxury of observing the battle before he's being thrust into it with one of Orochimaru's area attacks that floods the area that Izuna's built around them with more snakes.

Luckily, being a creature of fire, Shisui spits out a massive wave of flames that scorch the snakes into ash. It allows them a moment to breath, to *see.*

And Kakashi *sees* then, why Izuna might regard them as dead weight, and kakashi *has* seen him fight Akatsuki members before, in fact the first time he ever laid eyes on this Uchiha, he was toying with that undead shinobi made of nothing but black wire and masks. Now though…Kakashi never really bought into those rumors, though he'd said it plenty of times himself he still knows that Izuna is only a human, just like the rest of them.

But here…But now…

Orochimaru battles a Yokai, a blur of black and purple flames, with a swarm of black foxes created from nothing but fire that race across the flattened hideout. They roar and hiss and crackle, and keep Orochimaru from running too far, from finding a way to slither away, not that there's anywhere to go, not when the wall of flames is a hundred feet thick and closing in around them at the flick of Izuna's piercing mismatched eyes.

The Yokai himself is cloaked in purple ribs that absorb the heavy strikes Orochimaru throws at him…when they collide that is. Because Izuna is a blur, too fast for even his sharingan, and he realizes its because Izuna's not just moving fast, he's using his Space-time techniques, he's switching places with the numerous snakes that Orochimaru keeps dividing himself into, and everytime, Orochimaru ends up piercing one of his own on the end of his katana.

Itachi himself is preoccupied, he's trying desperately to reach Izuna, but everytime he gets within either of their speaking distance, Izuna would hold his hand out, as if telling him to stop, and something would send Itachi careening backward, and then the foxes would coalesce into a barricade of fire, and Itachi would spend a few precious seconds putting the flames out before trying again.

"I told you!" Izuna was screaming at him as the three got closer. He would never take his eyes from Orochimaru. Infact, as he spoke, he set his opponent on fire, the flames taking the form of a fox that claws up Orochimaru's neck and savagely bites into the side of his face. Orochimaru screams, but then his mouth opens wider and wider until his form slumps and another version of himself springs out, fully unscathed.

"This is *my* fight, and I won't have you or Konoha's agenda ruin this for me!" Izuna lunges forward, switches spaces, once, twice, three times as Orochimaru swirls to meet each one of his switches, and then a forth, where he finally lands a blow with his lightning-shining katana. But it's not good enough, it barely draws blood as Orochimaru's body twists and distorts out of the way.

"I have no agenda, let me help!" Itachi says, sending off a swarm of his crows before Izuna can answer.

"I need no help, not from Konoha dogs, not for this, not-" Izuna's eyes suddenly catch his, and for a second, the raging fires seem to wane. But then a drop of water lands in his hair, and he inhales the smell of fire and ash and snakes and the scorched earth and *lightning, and rain.*

Orochimaru's head whips around, towards *him,* when he realizes who caught the yokai's eye.

Ah. Shit. Is all he can think before he's raising a tanto blade just as the sannin's massive half-snake head lunges for him. The blade snaps between his fangs, and Kakashi manages to pull himself back just enough that they only graze the edges of his armbraces. There's enough power behind the bite that it leaves long gouges in the plating. He's bracing for the next attack when he feels the tell tale sign of space-time, the pop and whirl and disorientation as he's suddenly standing forty feet from where he was, and staring not at Orochimaru but Itachi's manic looking eyes.

The two start to scramble over to where they're fighting. From the corner of his eye, he can see Shisui and Tenzo giving them a wide berth, clearing wondering if there's going to be a good time for them to strike.

A rumble rolls through the skies, different from the roaring flames, the skies are growing deeper, darker, like the black fire is sucking the very sunlight from them. The hairs on the back of Kakashi's neck stand up on their ends. There's a storm brewing, there always is when Izuna fights. And that means…

Orochimaru has Izuna's katana between his teeth again, but the blade doesn't snap or bend or break the way Kakashi's had. Instead it flickers with chakra, with enough lightning that Kakashi can sense it from the other side of the crater. He can tell the two are snarling mean insults at each other, and then Izuna's chakra pulses, and he lets it loose in a blast of lightning that Kakashi can *hear* singeing the sannin's nerves.

Orochimaru roars, letting go of the blade and shoving himself away from Izuna, right into Itachi's swarm. Of which they're suddenly obliterated by a swarm of Orochimaru's own snakes.

The distraction works enough though, because Izuna whirlwinds himself into Orochimaru's space once again, this time with a clarity in his eyes that had been missing throughout the entire fight. From the folds of his sleeve, Kakashi sees a flash of paper flick into the palm of his hand right before he brings it down onto the sannin's arm. And with a strangled hiss, Orochimaru pulls that arm to stare as Izuna does a few signs and flares his chakra once more.

Threads of black ink lash out around Orochimaru's arm, crawling up along his shoulder and to his neck. "What is this?!" The sannin howls, "How?! I've never seen a seal like this!" He looks frantically at Izuna just before the yokai flicks another seal onto his other arm, and then two on his feet, and once Orochimaru's been brought to his knees, Izuna takes a breath.

Kakashi and Itachi make it just in time for Izuna to finish the seal with one slapped over Orochimaru's mouth. The sannin takes to glaring at them. There's a few seconds where Kakashi can't believe what he's seeing. After all that, Izuna just…wins? So unexpectedly, the last ace up his sleeve was just another seal?

Izuna flicks his sword out, it's still pristine, not a fleck of ash or blood on it. "I'd ask for your last words, but frankly, I don't care."

Izuna raises the blade, his eyes trained for Orochimaru's neck, the sannin's eyes burn, and his whole body strains, trying desperately to break free from the bonds that Izuna's caught him in, and they must be strong, because Kakashi can feel the power that strains against them, but those seals… that handwriting, that *chakra* tastes like pure fire, pure rage…it's not Izuna's.

"Kurama," Itachi mutters, coming to the same conclusion as him. They're so absorbed in it, in Orochimaru's end, that none of them see the kunai until it's too late. Until Izuna's blade gets knocked just enough to slash down and just barely graze Orochmaru's neck instead of slicing through.

Izuna's head snaps to the side, to where Tenzo is standing, his arm still extended, as guilty as charged. He's trembling, even as he and Shisui stiffly take their place in the half circle around the captured sannin, who's shoulders begin to shake with laughter.

Izuna doesn't say a word, but when Tenzo gets too close to Orochimaru, he holds his katana down, but at his feet. A threat. Get no closer. Kakashi feels heat at his back, hears the snarling roar of flame-foxes. And he sweats suddenly. They're trapped. All of them.

He wonders then, definitely not for the first time, if Izuna would kill him. If Izuna would kill his friends. His kin. But tenzo, the current object of his distaste, is neither kin nor friend in Izuna's eyes.

Kakashi's feet move before he's even realized it. Because Tenzo is still *his* teammate, still his squad. He doesn't know what to do though, not when Izuna's eyes are crying blood, and his entire body is so stiff, he barely appears to breathe.

Tenzo speaks, like a crackling log in a fire, "I…I've been instructed…that if possible, I would take Orochimaru back to Konoha to face a trial-" The katana currently pointed at his feet rises to his neck. Tenzo tenses. Shisui hisses and grabs his shoulder, pulling him back half a step, but he too is pinned down when Izuna's eyes snap to him.

"It's not possible," Izuna says, as calm as a chaos being contained within a person. The killing intent that Izuna is pulling around him is more potent than anything Orochimaru has managed so far. It keeps them all frozen to the spot. All except for the sannin himself, who laughs and laughs behind the seal over his mouth, so much so that his shoulders shake with it.

"You've caught him." Tenzo says, like he's reasoning. No one has dared to breathe, not even Itachi, "He is one of Konoha's missing nin. Therefore, he is Konoha's problem to-"

Izuna's blade descends, slices down in a swift stroke. Shisui shouts, tugging Tenzo away, and Kakashi lunges for Izuna, fearing the worst, fearing for Tenzo's neck. He reaches him just as he hears the blade catch, cut through, and the acrid smell of blood. Then he has Izuna's wrist in a vice grip, forces him to drop the sword. He doesn't look at him, can't muster the courage.

He whips around to Tenzo, to see the carnage that this yokai has caused, and he's already prepared to fight this *bastard! This lying, betraying, evil piece of shi-*

Tenzo is ten feet away, gasping for breath, clutching at his unharmed neck with Shisui checking him all over like a mother hen. Kakashi's curses halt, and he turns just in time to see Orochimaru's headless corpse fall to the ground.

"You-" His voice catches when the flame foxes howl and swarm over the body, devouring it hungrily, turning the flesh to black ash. "I thought you'd…"

Izuna snorts, a cruel, crude sound. When Kakashi finally manages to look at him again, the man has returned. He's no longer a creature, no longer a yokai, and Kakashi has a hard time thinking of anything other than that broken Uchiha he keeps seeing. His eyes are tired,

infinitely so. His face is streaked with blood from over use of his eyes, and as he wipes the back of his hand along his cheek before bending to pick up the katana, returning the bloodied blade back to its sheath. Then his body lists to the side.

Itachi is under his arm supporting him before Kakashi can tell his feet to move. “I got you,” Itachi mutters quietly. “You don’t have to do this alone.”

Izuna looks down at him, then to Kakashi. “I know,” He finally acquiesces. He lets out a long, slow sigh that seems to drain him even further. “I’ve known. But I also knew…” His eyes flick to Tenzo. “I knew something wasn’t right.”

Tenzo has recovered from thinking he was going to die, and now he stares listlessly at the ash that remains of Orochimaru’s body. “Why did you do it? You had him at your mercy and I…I thought you were our ally. I thought you’d listen…”

“I am your ally,” Izuna snaps, then he hisses, presses a palm to his red eye, and seems to hunch further into himself. The two of them nearly fall over. And Kakashi finally spurs himself into action, and carefully slides himself to Izuna’s other side, and Izuna easily drapes his arm across Kakashi’s shoulders.

He leans on him then, pulls away from Itachi, and for some reason Itachi shoots him one of those glares that he totally hasn’t noticed before now but ignores. Izuna looks around at the hellish flames, and the starting storms he’s caused. Kakashi can feel him tense, and then his eyes start to sluggishly bleed again as he sweeps his gaze across the landscape. The black flames retreat, the foxes swirl into nothing, and only the overcast clouds remain, a near storm still brewing.

Izuna shuts his eyes tight afterwards, and his weight suddenly doubles as he nearly falls over. “I overdid it,” He mumbles, so quiet Kakashi has to wonder if the others were meant to hear it. Louder he says, “I did you a favor and *you* know it.”

Tenzo looks like he wants to argue back, but instead, there’s a tense silence that only breaks when the storm finally does. He glances from the disappearing ash pile to Izuna, and back again. The rain patters down onto them, freezing cold but not the pelting Kakashi had assumed it’d be. Izuna takes another deep breath, then tilts his head up, his mouth turns into a smirk as the rain slides down the planes of his face, mixing with the blood and ash.

“That cost more chakra than I thought.” He hums to himself, “damn foxes.”

“They were a very dramatic touch,” Kakashi says, and startles when it causes Izuna to chuckle, and his body nearly careens totally into his. Kakashi keeps a tight grip on him as they nearly stumble over nothing.

“I’m at your mercy, Konoha,” Izuna snarks, particularly to Shisui. The Uchiha nearly takes the bait, given the way his mouth twists into a snarl, but then Itachi is staring at him hard, and there’s the tiniest shake of his head. Instead of a fight, Shisui only scoffs, and without his mask, they all witness his glorious eyeroll and dismissiveness.

“We should go collect the rest of our squads and set up a proper return route, now that this… this *fiasco* is over.”

“He’s right,” Kakashi says to Izuna when he doesn’t attempt to move himself. “We’re out in the open, and there’s no knowing who else saw your…dramatics.”

“Hn.” Izuna doesn’t say anything else, but he allows Kakashi to start pulling them in the direction they’d left the Anbu squads. Shisui and Tenzo pull ahead, while Itachi hovers around them, but leaves them alone as they shuffle through the crater Izuna’s fire had left.

He has a thousand questions about *how* Izuna had created such a massive fire pit with just those tags, but before he voice them, Izuna asks him, “Did you know?” suddenly, and the arm slung over his back tenses like a vice.

Kakashi remains calm, for once. There’s still so much adrenaline running through him that he feels he could snap at any moment, and there’s a tension under Izuna's skin, his chakra still sparking and reacting with the storm’s lightning like it’s second nature for him to do so. And Kakashi can feel it under his skin as well.

“No,” He says quietly. “I didn’t know.”

Izuna seems to believe him. “And if it was your mission to stop me?”

Kakashi picks his words more carefully as they pick their way up the crater’s edge. “I suspect I would fail, just as Tiger had.”

Izuna sees through it. He stops dead, and Kakashi is forced to as well or he’d lose his grip on him. Izuna pulls away, just to look at him, to squint at him, his eyes—because it’s both, because his hair is shoved far from his face and Kakashi can see all of him for once, and it catches his breath in a way he can’t seem to control—search through the slits of Kakashi’s porcelain anbu mask.

“Would you have tried to? As Tiger had?”

Would I?

Kakashi opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again though Izuna can see none of it.. He stares at Izuna, at the wild fury that skitters through his eyes and disappears again, at the furrow of his brow, his slight frown. He wants to say *How could I?* And that thought startles him into silence.

How could I?

“I think I would have declined the mission if it were handed to me,” He whispers. He thinks it's true. He’s never declined any kind of mission for any kind of reason. And yet…His heart beats louder than it should in his ears.

“Hn.” Izuna seems to find it acceptable, and allows them to move once again, though the furrow in his brow doesn’t budge, Instead it grows deeper.

Kakashi pretends not to notice how uncomfortable Izuna appears to be, even as he starts to shiver, starts to twitch, and Kakashi wonders if he should let go of him, let him walk on his own even though he's still a half-dead weight on his side. It gets worse. Just as they're about to regroup with the rest of their forces, Izuna stops dead once again, only this time Kakashi can feel the way all his muscles tense in his shoulders. He shuts his eyes then, and hisses between his teeth like he's in pain.

"What happened?" Kakashi asks, panic starting to rise in his chest when Izuna reaches up and grips at his shoulder.

No. No!

He grabs at Izuna as if it's instinct, and can't seem to let go even when Izuna hunches forward with another groan. Kakashi can feel it, the rising chakra that normally lays dormant under Izuna's skin flares to life, tinges to air with a taste of furious red chakra that eats away at the very air.

"It's Kurama," Izuna spits out through clenched teeth, his eyes wild, his chakra signature flaring up like he's preparing for another fight. "Let go!" He shoves at Kakashi's armor plating, trying to push him away, but Kakashi refuses.

"You can't go now!" Kakashi snaps back at him, "We need you here!" He's about to leave.

He's about to swirl away and send a letter telling me he's sorry, telling me all these things just to keep me here! Just to keep me from hating him when he goes. Like he can't help it if he does!

One of these days, Kakashi knew down to his soul, Izuna would leave and never return.

"Kurama needs me." Izuna's eyes snap up to him, and for a second they're not there at all. They're in the snow, in the blizzard, he can feel the biting cold in his bones, he can smell the snow, and he can see a haze of red as it trudges through the hills like a walking fire. There was a fight, his chest was slashed open from a sort of claw, he was flung, he was asking for help, there was…darkness—and he was waking up somewhere else.

And then he's back, back in the forest with the rain and Izuna hunched over the forest floor, with his other shoulder in Kakashi's death grip. Itachi comes crashing down from the trees just as Izuna shoves at him one last time, and he falters enough from the realization that it's happening all over again, that he's being left behind again for Kurama.

But he can't let it happen! He refuses. Kakashi makes up his mind then, as Izuna takes a deep breath as if he's preparing for battle, as he's preparing to *leave them all again.* He'll only get a millisecond, less-so because it's Izuna. But he's seen that stupid seal before, a modified flying thunder god seal mixed with reverse summonings and other things that Kakashi can't fathom but the base is the same seal he's seen a thousand times over. He knows that seal, he knows it regardless of all the other bells and whistles.

"Hold on," Minato would say whenever he'd carry them along, *"Hold on tight. Don't let go. Flash your chakra. Don't hide it from me."*

So he does just that, as Izuna's about to disappear on him, he lunges forward and snatches Izuna's hand into his own. And he can admit it to himself, in the comfort of his own mind, that it's something he's wanted to do for a time now. He holds Izuna's hand just as time and space warp and flicker around them. He flashes his chakra like a beacon at the same time. He gets to witness the pure shock crossing Izuna's face before the world turns upside down, and Kakashi holds on.

He blinks, and they're somewhere else, somewhere damp and dreary, and he's blinking, squinting at Izuna's face as the shock wears off and he's yelling *something.* He's yelling, and Kakashi can barely hear him over the dull droning *roar* of something much larger, obscured by the many buildings they've suddenly found themselves in.

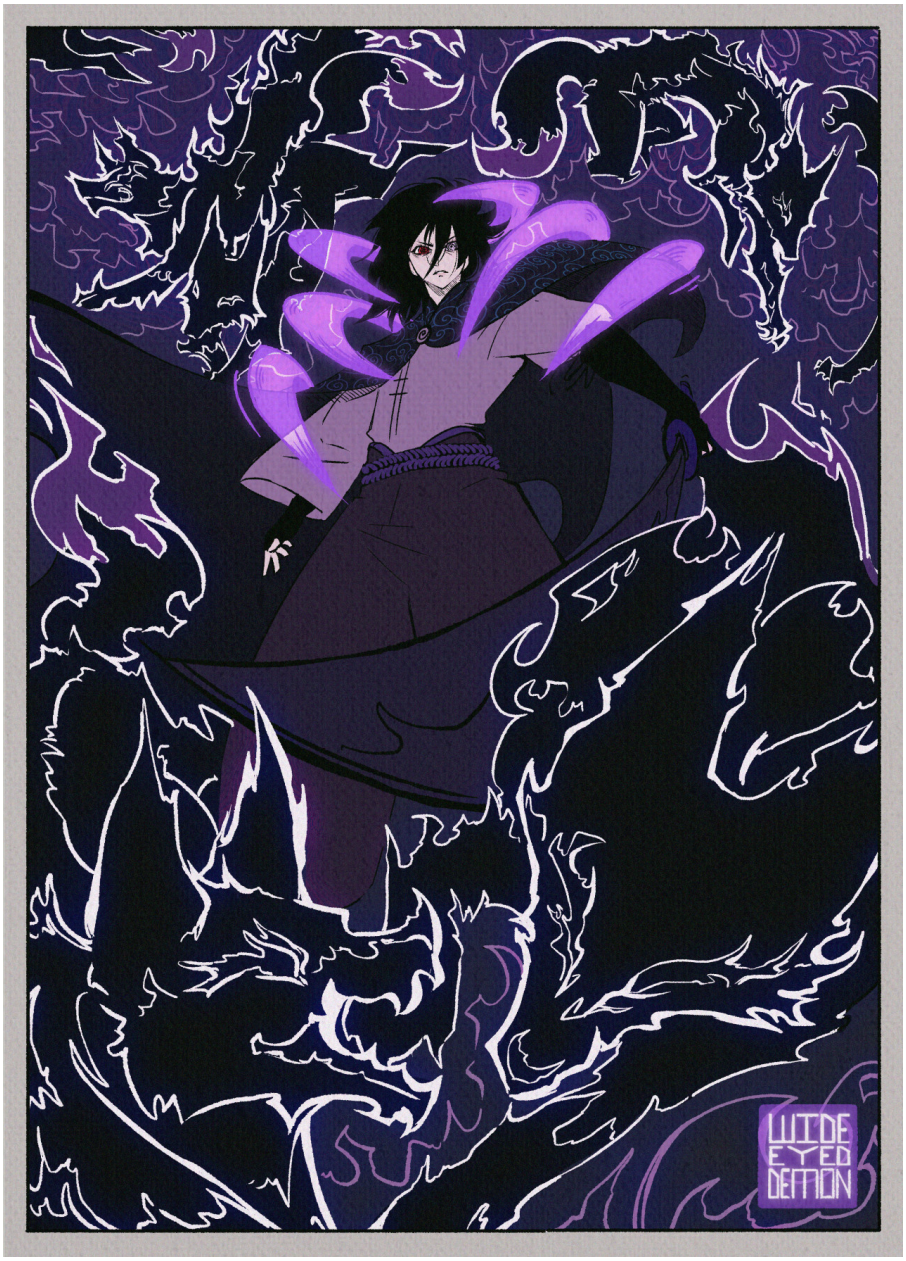
Izuna's ripping their hands apart and all of a sudden Kakashi senses seem to sharpen back into focus. And he wishes they hadn't. And he wishes he'd stayed in that forest where he belongs.

And he wishes that Kurama never called for Izuna in the first place as a massive shadow rises up from the mist that surrounds them. Izuna himself turns, going silent, quick as a flash with his black cloak billowing out behind him, and his gaze travels up and up and up.

And then he's looking back at Kakashi, who cannot take his eyes from the beast before him, as if he's never seen it before, as if this chakra that bleeds into the air haunts him in his very nightmares. He can taste the panic rising through him like bile in the back of his throat.

They're in Mist. He recognizes that much. And towering above them, with a gleaming red eye glaring down at them between slats of heavy plated armor, is the Sanbi.

~Some Art~



Chapter End Notes

EYY??

So I'm getting a little loosey goosey with how these jutsus work but I'm here for dramatic effect and sheer cool factor, and also I REALLY needed to get Kakashi and Izuna in mist, I DID decide to have Izuna kill orochimaru and immediately the two dip afterwards to help Kurama, like that wasn't a spur of the moment type thing, I've had this planned for months now!

Because they're in MIST, like Izuna SAID they would be. Also I LOVE the idea of Kakashi finally just getting enough courage to /hold Izuna's hand/ like that's an end all

be all and then BAM! You're instantly faced with a facet of your childhood trauma because of it!!

IRL Stuff:

T/W: Pet death and etc. (it's a bit of a vent but I need to say it somewhere)

So my cat died a few days ago. I kinda saw it coming, he was getting old, but then it sort of all just happened like getting hit by a freight train. He was getting skinnier and not eating for like a month, and I didn't even realize it because he lives with my mom and I'm on my college campus most of the times. But then...he just stopped eating all together. My mom called me, told me the news that the best thing to do was to put him down. It was a kidney failure, nothing we could do. And I thought in that moment that I had wasted all this time by not being there with him. Some how in my head I felt I had more time, and now...now I wouldn't get to see him ever. I was stuck in the city and I was struck by this horrible fuckin guilt that I would never get to say goodbye.

But luckily, the vet she'd taken him to allowed me the time to get myself to him; my mom lives in the suburbs so it was about an hour and a half drive. I got to say goodbye, I was relieved even though I knew it would be the last time. When I got there he was moving around the room, out in the open, he wasn't scared of anything at all. He was so alive, but he was dying. He purred when I held him and said goodbye. And even though it was really hard, I held him when they put him down. I knew it in my fucking soul that if I didn't I would regret it for the rest of my life.

I don't know how to explain to you what this cat meant to me, and what my memories of him represented. It was like loosing him was loosing the last piece of my childhood. I know when I buried him it was in the wrong place. But I buried him all the same. The right place doesn't exist anymore, it only existed when I was a child, And I can't go back in time to that place, to those memories. And even if I did, I wouldn't be the same person as I was. I wouldn't even have the same name.

There are so many things I want to say about grief and this fic in particular...but I don't know. In my head, I know it to be truth, I know there's a thousand truths I try to tell with this story, but then I remember...this is just a fanfiction about Sasuke.

He Dreams of All the Battles Won

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's furious. He can taste his fury like fire on his tongue as he spouts nonsensical insults that seem to fly over Kakashi's head as the man comes back to reality.

"Are you an idiot?!" He practically screams, and it takes him a second to snatch his hand back, having forgotten Kakashi had grabbed it in the first place. "I could have killed you! Could have brought just your hand with me instead of all of you!" Something like fear and desperation claw at the inside of his throat when he thinks about it. "I could have—you could have-" Kakashi's eyes refocus somewhere over his shoulder, and both of them are freezing, feeling the cold-sharp chakra of something *terrifying.*

Izuna turns slowly, taking in the half-broken rubble of this unfamiliar village and the massive silhouette looming far *far* above his head. The mist is thick and dark and blurs all the details out into vague shapes, but the creature before him is so large that he can still make out the scaled feet and glowing red eyes. It's the size of a building, perhaps even larger. Up and up, Izuna cranes his head back and then some, as three massive tails swish and thrash behind the creature.

Shit.

Is all he can think before a bright burst of chakra scatters across his senses, and he's whipping around to grab at Kakashi just as a clawed hand snatches at his cloak and *yanks* him several hundred feet in one disorienting motion.

"Don't just stand there you dumbass!" Kurama shouts as he bodies them out of the way of a huge claw slamming down just where they'd been. Izuna sucks in a lungful of iron-filled air, tries to breathe out the panic rising in his stomach.

Kurama lands and drags them behind a building. Half of it has already been turned to rubble. Once they have a second to gather themselves, Kurama is whirling on him. "What the *hell* Izuna?" He snaps, grabs a handful of his cloak and twists it in his claws. Izuna grabs his wrist and shoves him away. Kurama looks worse for wear. His haori hangs in tatters around his waist, hair frazzled and spiked like a spooked cat, a fresh set of scratches runs down his chest and slowly heals as he stands there, heaving deep breaths like he's on the edge of his rope.

Impossible. Izuna can't believe he'd call for him just for this. *The Sanbi should be no real challenge to him.*

"Why is he here?!" Kurama makes to snatch Kakashi's arm like he can't believe he's there either, but his claws snag on air. Kakashi dodges him with more power than necessary judging from how he practically leaps away with a drawn kunai. Kurama snarls at him, all fangs and fury and red chakra that bubbles to the surface.

Kakashi tilts his head down, but otherwise doesn't say a word. There's a thousand different answers in his silence. And Izuna can't deal with that can of worms right now.

"It doesn't matter." He says it to himself more than anything, because it most certainly *does fucking* matter, "We'll deal with that later, we should just focus on getting this over with." He's got a lot of explaining to do when he goes back to Konoha. Like. Why did he leave in the first place? Why did he accidentally steal one of their top shinobi? Why did he so brutally kill Orochimaru and burn everything his filthy hands have touched? *They lied to me. Those filthy fucking Anbu all knew. They all had orders to bring him back alive! They should be thanking me! They chould be praising me for killing their most pesky missing-nin!*

But all of that can wait now, with all this rage simmering his blood, there is a fight to be won. "I'll just put the Sanbi in a genjutsu…" He looks around, suddenly noticing the absence of what should be a full on evacuation. "where are the Mist shinobi?" The part of the village they're in does seem to be less dense than Konoha. When he looks out at the destruction, there's a large swath of destroyed buildings, starting farther inward, as if Kurama had been trying to lure the bijuu out of the village proper.

"It's not gonna be that simple," Kurama's voice pitches in a way that Izuna's unfamiliar with, it catches him off guard. He sounds…frantic. *Panicked.* His eyes flick from Izuna to Kakashi and back again. "He's *here…Madara."*

Izuna's blood turns to ice. It takes all his will power not to look back at Kakashi. "Fuck." He says.

Kurama's eyes blaze with the same sentiment. "He's killed or stunned most of the Mist shinobi…or scared them away. I pissed him off and this is personal now…but if he figures out what I am…"

Double fuck. Izuna swallows down the sudden dread. If he finds out Kurama is the Kyuubi, he'll try to use him like he uses the Sanbi.

"He won't," it sounds empty. "I…that's why you brought me here." He says it just so he can convince himself. "I can break you out. I'm better than he ever was."

Kurama narrows his eyes and looks at Kakashi once again. "And this brat? What about him?"

"What about me?" Kakashi says. He sounds corpse-like. Behind his mask, his eyes never leave the direction of the Sanbi's thunderous shadow.

"You should run," Kurama says before Izuna can suggest anything. "Run as far as you can and keep going until you can't see us."

Kakashi hesitates, his eyes finally returning to the pair of them. They slide from Izuna to Kurama and back again. Izuna can tell the second his resolve is set. "I…I can help. Izuna is-"

Izuna cuts him off swiftly, "This is not your battle." He says it cold, still remembers the heat of their hands held together, his stupid eyes looking at him, stubborn in that second. Fearless.

And it all washed away when their feet hit solid ground, when reality came calling.

“It could be.” Kakashi’s eyes flash. “You’ve been talking about this since forever. This is it, right? We’re in Mist, I know that’s…that’s the *Sanbi,”* Kakashi spits the name out like venom, which makes Kurama’s eye twitch, his claws flex but Kakashi pretends to ignore it, “You told me it’s being controlled by Madara, isn’t it? He’s Akatsuki, and a threat to all of us.”

“You don’t understand,” Kurama snarls at him.

“Then *explain it* so I can,” Kakashi hisses right back, though his attention never wavers from Izuna.

Kurama doesn’t get the chance to respond. Izuna senses it first, and it’s his turn to yank them both into one of his portals. He warps them to a rooftop within his eyesight just as the rest of the building they were behind turns to dust. One of the Sanbi’s tails drags back over the ruins. The bijuu lets out a terrifying roar that shakes him down to his bones. To his ears, it sounds like a cry for help. Izuna scans the area for Obito, sharingan whirling and pulsing so much he can feel a headache start to form. A few bloody tears roll down his cheeks, and he’s quick to wipe them away. He’s got a fierce headache starting to pound its way to the front of his skull.

He wasted too much chakra on all those Amatarasu foxes and everything else that had happened in Orochimaru’s lair. Fighting a sannin was never fun, always so exhausting. Izuna just wants to go to sleep for an eternity.

He finally spots Obito, standing tall and proud on the Sanbi’s shell, arms crossed, chin raised, mask like a whirlpool devouring his features whole, just as Kurama bites out, “No can do, Konoha dog, if you knew what’s good for you, you wouldn’t go lookin’ for answers. Just go hide and Izuna will chase you down when the coast is clear.”

Kakashi pulls back slightly, offended. Kurama’s chakra swirls about them, unchecked and corrosive. Izuna can feel it permeating the very air, and no doubt it’s making their ill tempers so much worse. “I will *not-”*

“I’m going to separate them,” Izuna says over their squabbling, “I’ll fight Madara, and you two will knock some sense into the Sanbi. Kakashi can help break the genjutsu.”

Kakashi falters. “I… *Me? The Sanbi?”* He glares at Izuna, a thousand questions in just the slight tilt of his head, the narrowing of his eyes.

“I don’t want this brat near *either* of them!” Kurama shouts at the same time.

Izuna has made up his mind. Kurama won’t let Kakashi die, he’s sure of it despite everything that’s happened. “Well, it’ll have to do.”

“I could help you fight Madara-”

“No.” Kurama and Izuna both whirl on him instantly, much to Kakashi’s clear annoyance, though he only squints at them from behind his mask, body perfectly still.

“There’s no time to argue over this. I’m luring Madara away, and you two go for the K.O, *got it?”* Izuna draws his katana, the weapon crackles in the damp air, he can feel the ripple of his chakra flooding into the blade, still darkened with Orochimaru’s blood.

Kurama catches sight of the rusty color, His eyes glint with interest but he holds his tongue as Izuna prepares to attack. From the corner of his eye, he sees Kakashi start forward, only for Kurama to snatch him by the collar of his armor plating.

“You’re with me, brat,” Kurama hisses at him, “Don’t worry about this fool.”

“But Izuna’s-”

“I won’t let the idiot die, regardless of how stupid he’s being.”

Izuna tunes them out and focuses on Obito’s shadow. He can’t be distracted by anything during this fight. Not Kurama, not ghosts nor memories, and certainly not what Kakashi will think if he learns the truth of this matter.

Obito is nothing more than a small blob of black and red, casually strolling the length of the Sanbi’s ridged back. There’s nothing within his immediate vicinity for him to swap with, so Izuna opens up a vortex. First, he makes the one closest to him. He steadies his breathing, lets his nerves settle from the jumbled storm they’re in.

Behind him, he can still hear Kakashi trying to explain that Izuna’s not ready, that his eyes were bleeding mere seconds ago, that they’d just come from fighting a sannin—all these things mean nothing. Izuna *is* ready. He’ll *always* be ready to strike at the heart of the end of the world.

No hesitations this time. Kakashi doesn’t know, and he never needs to know.

It doesn’t matter.

It doesn’t matter.

He is Madara.

Madara.

Izuna takes a second to lean into a lunge.

And then he’s off, let’s the lightning race through his veins, a burst of chakra and speed propels him through his vortex, and on the other side he shoots out right behind that bastard *with no other name besides Madara—* if only for his own sanity. *I got you.* Izuna snarls in vicious satisfaction as his blade pierces cloak, but the moment doesn’t last.

He can tell when the resistance turns to nothing, and his blade slips through Madara’s being as if he were not there. He flicks his blade up and finishes the strike regardless. When he pulls away, he has cut nothing but the mist. Madara spins to face him, and with him the Sanbi rumbles and shifts. Izuna widens his stance and sends chakra to his feet so he’s not bucked off instantly.

“Hm…” Madara tilts his head. “I must say…I did not expect you to be here as well.” He takes a step to the right, Izuna goes left.

“I guess I’m full of surprises.”

Madara just hums at him, casually tapping the chin of his mask like he’s thinking. He crosses one of his arms casually. “Last I heard, you were in Konoha’s pocket. They tried to put a leash on you, too bad they didn’t know you were already owned.”

“I’m not the one who’s been collared, *Madara.”* Standing this close to the Sanbi, he can practically taste the pain and hatred that bleeds from the bijuu’s chakra. He can feel it too, pulling at him, urging him to just *kill. Kill him. Kill him now! Do it!*

Madara pauses, Izuna follows suit. “How could you get here if you were all the way over there…”

“How’d you know I wasn’t coming this way the whole time?”

Madara gives him a flat look. “We both know that’s a stupid question. So then…Rinnegan?” Izuna takes a stab at him, the blade goes right through his head, he keeps it there so Madara can’t attack back. One he pulls away he’ll have less than a second.

“I nearly killed you the last time we met. I’ll be sure to do it properly this time.”

Madara ignores his taunting. “A reverse summons?” He falls suddenly, and Izuna swears as a hand comes sweeping up. He narrowly avoids a solid strike to the chin. He backs up three paces.

“What does it matter, where I was, where I’ve been. I’m here now, the thorn in your side. You took such…special care to personally see me after I killed your precious Akatsuki.” Izuna holds his blade up. “Look, another name off my list, and another Akatsuki bastard burned to dust.” He grins as Madara’s eye traces the blade when he lowers it back down again. “Have you given up on me?” With his right hand, he flicks a kunai hidden in his cloak. Madara lets it sail right through his torso, and Izuna swaps places with it, taking another stab. Only, Madara doesn’t fall for his trick twice. He doesn’t attack, and Izuna doesn’t back away.

“I’ve seen that tattoo before. The one on that crazy Uzumaki’s shoulder.” Izuna bites his tongue, the pain helps him keep his nerve. “Ah,” Madara chuckles lightly, “I see.”

“You see *nothing,”* Izuna growls. “Your vision is flawed-” Madara lazily turns to face him. He keeps his grip tight on his Katana, still pierced through Madara’s middle. Izuna grins at him, his voice a mere whisper. “And I know who you are… *Obito.”*

Obito’s entire body seems to freeze. “Obito has been dead for years. How could I be him?”

Izuna laughs. “How could you be anyone else?” And he takes his chance to swap with the kunai lying where he was a second ago, and good thing too as Obito’s hand snatches the blade before he could snag him instead. Izuna takes a chance to look at him, let’s himself smile as all foxes should, and Obito takes the bait.

Izuna runs, the feeling of a raging madman on his tail, wisps of flames eating at the edge of his cloak. Obito is fast. *So fast.* Izuna opens portals and rips into space and time and Obito follows him, keeping up at every twist and turn. Several times, he appears in front of him and they'd lock blades or Izuna would duck a well aimed blow to his face, something that would surely take out an eye.

"What? Don't like that name? Thought it died with you back in that cave?" Izuna taunts him, sets his cloak on fire when he gets too close, gives him an electric shock when he tries to grab Izuna's arm. But Izuna's a live wire wrapped in lightning, spinning out from under Obito's eye. He drags him farther and farther into the village, away from all the silence and the chaos.

"Who are you?" Obito snaps at him when they both reemerge atop a roof several streets away. In the distance, he hears the Sanbi roar, and a building getting blown to bits. Izuna circles Obito until he's the one with his back to the chaos.

"I'm your brother, Madara." He grins.

"Shut up!" Obito vanishes, appearing behind him in a flash, and Izuna swaps their positions, Chidori chirping all up his arm. *Here. NOW!* But Obito…quick as always, Obito drops into the floor, and once more Izuna opens up a portal and uses it to get away. Only this time, Obito manages to chuck a kunai at him. It follows through to the other side and thunks itself squarely into the meat of his shoulder. Izuna hisses, grabs for the blade when he hears the sound of sizzling, He dislodges the blade and manages to swat it with his katana like a bat.

The explosion still catches him off his feet, singeing his forearm and hand. The pain is sharp but not unbearable, he's gotten worse burns from training as a kid. He flips around and meets Obito's next few strikes head on. Kunai and fire are thrown his way and deflected with his own fire. He can feel it all eating away at his chakra. His eyes spin until they ache, until they bleed, but he keeps going. He had no choice.

Far away, he can see the massive shadow of the Sanbi, and a bright, orange light flickering in and out of the clouds of dust kicked up by the bijuu's tails.

The next second, there's a rain of shuriken falling from the sky. Izuna leaps into a portal, and throws up a susano'o rib just as three more tags follow him through. The explosion makes a crater in the roof he's landed on, and he lands inside the building. His feet have barely touched the ground before Obito is there, melting out of the wall and instantly taking a swing at him with a trailing chain that wraps itself around Izuna's middle. Izuna let's susano'o expand slightly, channeling his lightning through it, straining the metal until it snaps into a million, lightning-charged pieces that flicker and glow.

If Obito is surprised, he doesn't show it, a sword seems to materialize out of the air by his hand, and the blade clashes against Izuna's own. He pushes through the strike and with a well timed pulse of chakra and lightning, he snaps through that weapon too. Izuna can't help but grin as his blade sends a crack through Obito's mask before he manages to turn himself incorporeal and dance away from him.

“This game we’re playing… It seems to have no end,” Obito says, tracing a hand down the fracture. “What’s your goal, Uchiha? What is it you crave besides this misplaced vengeance?”

Izuna’s jaw clenches at the comment. His grip tightens on his katana, a weapon decorated in love and loss. “You should be the last to talk about misplaced vengeance.” He can feel his chakra flickering dangerously. One of his susano’o ribs dissipates. Just how much did his Orochimaru fight take out from him? He was momentarily down, yes, from the sudden influx of his chakra use, but he still had reserves.

“If you know so much about me, then you should know that I seek to save this wretched world!” Obito spits at him. “We could have a world without pain, a world without war, a world without *death!* It would be paradise!”

Izuna has seen this world. In his dreams he’s seen it, but the reality is pain, war, and death. It is fire. It is ashes. It makes his side ache, a deep pain that spreads worse than the bright twinge in his back or the drag of exhaustion that pulls at his limbs. It spreads from the twist of scar tissue that Naruto had whirled into his skin.

“No such paradise exists,” Izuna whispers, “What you seek will only bring the destruction of this wretched world.”

Obito curses at him. “What do you know of it, fake brother of mine? What could you *possibly* know!”

“I know more than you ever will!” Izuna snaps at him. He feels the second set of ribs waning. He needs to end this fight soon. He lunges forward, dropping a portal right under Obito’s feet a dropping them both off a block away from the destroyed roof. From up here, they can see the remnants of the Sanbi’s rampage…sans Sanbi. Izuna lets out a sharp laugh, Kurama and Kakashi have won their side of the battle.

Obito notices the lack of bijuu right away. With a frustrated snarl, he whips around and pulls the sleeve of his right arm up and out of the way. Izuna barely has time to brace himself before a dozen sharpened branches shoot out at him. He ducks and weaves through them as they sprout and chase, forming into roots that reach out to try and snare him.

Several times, the branches form into spears that split into a million different ends, all spiraling towards him like snakes wanting to bind and crush him to pieces within their grasp. He lets his fire take out most of it, burns it all away in a wash of black flames, but Obito does not stop.

He comes at him with shuriken, swords, chains, everything. Izuna is forced to dodge and switch places, sometimes with Obito himself, but Izuna can tell his opponent is starting to learn his patterns, always doing a flourish to throw weapons in every direction whenever Izuna vanishes for even a microsecond.

He’s down to his last set of ribs as his amaterasu flames roar to life, lighting up Obito’s own cloak, He can’t spare the chakra to mold them into foxes, and they’re swept away with Obito’s own mangekyo. They still clear the branches Obito keeps creating.

Izuna scowls when he realizes the fight's not slowing down any time soon. Not to mention, there's a light misty drizzle that's not too stormy for something like Kirin, but dampens all his flames.

Near him, he can feel the fiery twinge of Kurama's chakra, and Kakashi's right underneath it, like he's being hidden. The urge to reach out and call for Kurama is great, so much so that he has to refrain from gripping at his shoulder to make sure the tattoo is still there…as if it could go anywhere at all. But he doesn't. Because Kurama and Kakashi are perhaps the two worst matchups for Obito, and Izuna can finish this on his own.

I can.

I will.

He parries the next blow with his katana, then another, and another. A rain of shuriken. A barrage of pointed wooden stakes. He lands on the ground, too heavy, too slow, and Obito turns it into a wave with an earth release. A portal gets him exploding tags. Switching places grants him a second that Obito follows with a swirl of fire as high as a building. Izuna runs, Obito gives chase. More roots, they grow and sprout from the ground, the walls, reaching, tangling, grabbing at his hands and legs.

His last susano'o ribs flicker out, and a well timed root springs out and coils around his torso like a vice. Izuna hisses as the breath leaves his lungs. Then he inhales deep, and lets out a wash of fire that engulfs the entire street he's run down, including himself and all the branches.

He portals a few blocks away, into a thin alley, heaving for a clean breath of air, feeling the pressure in his chest fade.

"Izuna!" Kurama shouts at him, his head whips towards the sound. On instinct, he catches the bundle of papers flung at him before he even looks up to meet Kurama's eye. Unraveling the papers reveals dozens and dozens of the same seal. He grins, looks up to Kurama who is doused in a blaze of fiery yellow chakra.

It hurts to look, the bright glow of him sharpens the phantom stab wound in his side. He turns his eyes away, rustles through the papers and pretends to study the ink lines.

"Kakashi told me you used these on the *snake* sannin of all the fools. A total waste if you ask me."

"I was getting annoyed," Izuna mutters with no bite.

Kurama huffs, "Come here, brat, you're dead on your feet-" Izuna drops through a portal before Kurama can say another word, before he can give him any chakra, or say something that'll just twist the knives that crawl up his side even deeper.

It takes no time at all for Obito to find him on the roof, and they start up this deadly dance of wooden stakes and black fire, reality bending and warping around them, lightning crackling across the gaps between them.

“I see you’ve brought your Konoha pet with you-” Obito goads.

“Am I the pet, or is Konoha? Which is it?” Izuna snarks. He opens a portal, intent to travel ten feet to Obito’s left, but instead, he’s dumped five. He whirls around, but not fast enough as Obito clocks his mistake. And it’s a deadly one.

With a vicious snarl, Obito lunges forward, taking his chance.

For a moment he feels nothing as the blade slides between his two bottom ribs. Then it races through his like fire, like he’s being burned alive. He doesn’t scream, he can’t with how hard he grits his teeth because Obito is laughing but he’s *real.*

Izuna grips the blade near the handle, stops it from going any farther, stops Obito from pulling away, from becoming a phantom, and with his other hand, he slaps Kurama’s seal onto his forehead. The paper burns away, etching the lines of ink and flaming bright chakra into the wood, and farther still as the seal expands and coils around Obito’s head.

It takes a second. And then another for Obito to realize what’s happened. He lets go of the hilt, and kicks Izuna with all his might. There’s no chakra behind it, but it lands right near Izuna’s now impaled gut, and it sends him tumbling away, if only for a moment.

Izuna laughs, spits blood. His eyes are flickering, but he allows himself the cruel moment of satisfaction to record it with his sharingan as Kurama descends from the sky like a blazing demon from the depths of hell. His claws get an inch into Obito’s flesh of his arm, and the man is set into flames.

Obito lets out a blood curdling scream, then yells, *“ZETSU!”* Before he starts stumbling back into the mist. Kurama roars, starts after him, then turns back towards *him.*

“What are you doing!?” Izuna’s voice is ragged from all the smoke and fire he’s inhaled. He can barely stand, and a second later he proves himself right by finally collapsing into a heap on the ground. His eyes finally flicker out just as Kurama rushes over to him. “Go after him!”

A second later, Kakashi is leaping over to them with a haunted look in his eyes.

“What the fuck.” Kakashi swears when Izuna tries to sit up with a tanto blade sticking out of his abdomen.

“Where did he go?” Izuna snaps at him, ignoring the white hot pain and the wave of dizziness that threatens to drown him. He rips the blade out and a gush of blood drenches his shirt. Next to him, there’s a wary but warm presence that hisses out something inhuman. “Madara, he-”

“He…I didn’t see him-” Kakashi confesses, starting forward with something like fear in his eyes. “I saw this creature, that thing from before and he-”

“So he’s still *alive.”* Izuna hisses, getting the picture. The pain in his side is…

The warm presence hovers closer, bright chakra, glowing golden like the sun. A hand presses to his wound, and for a second, Izuna blacks out due to the pain. He shoves the warmth away. There's the memory buried there. The nightmare. This pain, the person who caused it, and… Naruto.

"No." He say firmly, even though he knew he could die. "Don't save me this time."

That causes Kakashi to rip off his anbu mask. There's a thin trail of blood running down his sharingan eye, flickering between tomoe and mangekyou.

Izuna doesn't remember him being there… *why is he here?* This is that memory again. It haunts him. Between the specks of black in his vision he can see Naruto, and he can feel the pain and…and he knows what happens next. *Fuck* he knows what happens next.

"Don't-" He says. His voice is failing him, sluggish, but he puts all the pain he can into the word and hopefully Naruto will understand this time. He's never gotten him to listen before, but maybe this time. Naruto leans forward regardless, about to heal him and sacrifice his life even though Izuna doesn't *want that.* So he snatches Naruto's wrist in his bloody hand. It burns him. All the way down to his soul he burns. He knows he's crying, real tears and not blood, and he can't stop it for the life of him.

He knows he's dying too, but all he can feel are the thorns tearing his soul to shreds. "I can't…can't watch you die again," He says, or he thinks he does. "Just this once…Don't make me."

"Shit," He hears Naruto mutter. The silence is filled with a horrible wheezing, one that Izuna only belatedly recognizes as his own breathing. "Izuna-Izuna you fucking *bastard!"* There's anger there, something out of place. "I'm not gonna die! Let me heal you, for fucks sake!"

"You don't know that," Izuna insists. "You don't know!"

"I do know it!" Naruto rips his hand out of his grasp, and tries again to go for the sluggishly bleeding wound at his side. Izuna has barely any energy left, but somehow, he knows that if Naruto gets what he wants, he'll have to watch him die all over again. And then this horrid nightmare would start over from the beginning.

And Sasuke would be alone.

So he stops him again, tries to look him in his slitted eyes, turned golden just like the rest of him, kyuubi chakra and all. "I said I'd be the death of you, *Usuratonkachi.* Don't do it. You know I'll stop you if you try-"

That seemed to snap something in Naruto, but nothing good. He takes a breath, slowly pulls himself from Sasuke's grasp. And for a second, Sasuke thinks he's won. That finally, *finally* he'll get to die. Sasuke's vision swims, the bright figure in front of him turning into a haze. Then he looks to someone off to Sasuke's left, someone that Sasuke knows is not supposed to *be here.* A bright, silver and black spot.

"Kakashi," Naruto mutters, "Knock him out."

“What.”

Sasuke shakes his head. “Kakashi is dead.”

“Once I give him chakra he’ll redirect it to his eyes.” Naruto says, not to him but to the ghost hovering over Sasuke’s shoulder. “So do it or he’ll kill himself.”

The ghost looks at him, he looks at the ghost, and it’s….“Kakashi?”

For a second he rages against it, against the darkness waiting for him, against the hands that hold him, against the golden light that finally slams into his soul. There’s a swell of chakra underneath his skin and he *burns,* and he *screams,* and the nightmare ends.

Chapter End Notes

Y'all are eating SO well right now. I'll be real, these last few chapters I have just kinda been sitting on them for a while; though all of them were like 3/4 done and not really functional, so it didn't really take too long for me to clean stuff up and make things flow and fit together (Hopefully)

Anyway, I want to thank everyone for their kind words last chapter, and I also wanted to point out that the last three chapter titles were all FALL OUT BOY lyrics, y'all, my middleschooler heart really jumped out at the opportunity. 'A Random Lottery of Meaningless Tragedy' 'And a Series of Near Escapes' are one line from "The Pink Seashell" And 'Part-Time Soulmate, Full-Time Problem' Is from "Hold Me Like a Grudge" (And honestly, could write a whole separate fic based on that lyric alone)

This chapter's title is from My Chemical Romance's "Foundation of Decay"

Hence the Moon is Dark

Chapter Notes

BOOM Kakashi POV!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's a stillness that falls onto them the second Izuna drops, like he'd taken all the life out of the world along with him into unconsciousness. Kakashi's hands unclench from their fists. His own heart pounds against his ribs, roaring in his ears, racing down his veins. He takes a shaking breath, staring at Izuna's face for any signs of him waking up…but there is none, not even the flutter of his lashes. The genjutsu holds, and he crumbles under the relief and stress at the same time.

Kurama gets to work then. His clawed hands bracket Izuna's wound, first stopping the steady flow of blood, and then slowly, he spreads that golden light all over Izuna's body until both of them gleam like lanterns in the darkening twilight. Kakashi has never seen anything like it before. He keeps his eyes on the slowly stitching wound, and not on Izuna's face. He feels almost guilty, but then again…There's a burning question he can't snuff out, though he kind of gets the picture.

But then…

Kakashi is dead.

He sits on his feet, hands clenched on his thighs, and tries not to think about it.

Kakashi is dead.

Kurama's face remains a scowl, one that grows deeper the longer he looks at Izuna's unmoving features. "This idiot," Kurama is muttering. "Stupid Uchiha fool…" Kakashi notices, then pretends he doesn't, the slight rim of unshed tears pooling under Kurama's irises, the pain in his flickering pupils, grief set in the clench of his fanged teeth.

There's silence in the smoking half destroyed ruins of this village. A heavy one that permeates the mist. Kakashi thinks that Kurama should have a noise to him, something like growling, roaring flames, something to mark the sheer wealth of power hidden beneath his skin that he now pours out into the world, into Izuna's soul. There should be a sound to the way his form burns like pure light, but there is none.

He's too aware then, when he hears the crumble of concrete and grit under foot, the slight shift of the air to mark another's presence. He leaps to his feet, with his kunai drawn up and all his senses blaring back to life after this exhausting, nonsensical day.

“Settle down, brat,” Kurama spits at him as his golden bright chakra flickers out and dies like a snuffed flame. The sudden chill stings him down to his bones. Kurama runs a clawed hand gently over Izuna’s freshly healed wound, only a sliver of a scar remaining, before he’s turning to meet the figure making its way over the ridge of their roof.

It takes Kakashi an embarrassingly long time to figure out the stumbling shinobi is the Sanbi’s jinchuuriki. The Mizukage. He still doesn’t lower his weapon or his guard until the boy has stopped fully to stare at the three of them through squinting, purplish eyes that seem to look right through him. Slowly, Kakashi makes his way back over to Izuna’s side and bends down to sit in a crouch. He refrains from hovering like he so desperately wants to.

The Mizukage lets out a sigh that seems to make his entire body sag into the ground. He stares at Kurama, bewildered. “You’re…Kurama,” He says, his voice raspy like he’s inhaled smoke. Kurama tilts his head, but offers no further comment. The Mizukage chuckles humorlessly, and for a second his attention wavers to the destruction around him. Kakashi can see the second reality hits for the young kage, just how much damage he’s caused.

When his eyes focus back onto Kurama, they’re like chips of ice. “We’ve a lot to talk about. I need to know what happened. I need to know… *everything,”* he seems to notice Izuna for the first time, which causes Kakashi to hunch closer to him. He doesn’t like the way his eyes glare down at Izuna, doesn’t like the instant recognition of what Izuna is. But he doesn’t make a comment about it, just moves on to take in Kakashi as well.

“Of all the shinobi to come crashing through my village,” The boy practically spits, “It just *had* to be you.” He can taste Sanbi chakra in the air. It takes all his willpower to not shrink into himself as it slithers like cold sweat down his neck. He glares up at the boy. He has no words for this jinchuuriki that he’s just saved. He did what Izuna asked of him, nothing more.

The Mizukage looks away with a dismissive upturn of his nose. *The nerve!* Kakashi wants to shout. “I can’t have *him* running around this village. There’s too much unrest as it is, and he’s too recognizable.”

Kakashi scowls. “I’m not bad at making myself disappear,” He says, garnering their attention.

Kurama shakes his head. “If you hide, you will do so in plain sight. Give me your arm.” He holds out a claws hand. Kakashi’s mind tells him to hesitate, but the battle-tested soldier in him, who’d been following Kurama’s field commands for the better part of an hour, has him reacting before his thoughts can catch up. So he gives over his arm only to have Kurama tear his vambrace off, and with a deft claw, draw a seal into his skin with his chakra. Kakashi hisses at first, the chakra stinging, but then it stops hurting and he realizes that Kurama’s chakra is actually…nice. In the way the sun is both scorching and soothing. He watches as the seal swirls into existence, feels it bleed under his skin and stays there.

He looks up to a smirk, one that's disconcerting. The Mizukage snorts. “Huh. Subtle.”

Kakashi studies the seal, pulsing his chakra to bring it up to the surface. Some sort of henge or illusion, more subtle than one Kakashi would be able to put on himself. He catches sight

of something dark hovering just above his vision, then pulls down a tuft of his hair to find that it's no longer silver, but the blue-black of a crow's feather.

"Ugh, you're too damn anbu lookin,'" Kurama says. Then he unclips Izuna's cloak and shakes it out from under him. Kakashi's thoughts halt as the cloak gets thrown to him, landing in his arms in a heap of shimmering black cloth, along with…

Izuna's Hitai-ate. The swirl stares up at him as he slowly picks it up. "Wear it, I don't care, just hide that stupid sharingan."

Kakashi puts it down, allows himself to don Izuna's cloak, lets it settle around his shoulders. He understands perfectly why Izuna likes it so much. It's comfortable, with a thousand interior pockets that Kakashi refrains from snooping through, and it's warm. It smells of foxes, and rain, and smoke, lightning, and Izuna.

"Hurry, I can sense some of my shinobi are getting curious. The city's coming back to life." The Mizukage's attention is somewhere over his shoulder, out into his village.

Kakashi tucks the Hitai-ate into one of it's many pockets. He can't do it, even for a disguise. Instead he pulls out a swath of bandages and quickly wraps it around his head and over his eye. Kurama doesn't comment on his decision, just hums at him as his disguise is complete.

"Come. We can get this all sorted out," The Mizukage says.

It's not an offer Kakashi feels like they're in a position to refuse. Kurama looks down at Izuna's still unconscious form, lying as still as death, his head slightly tilted to the side, his black hair like a hurricane around his face. He seems to come to the same conclusion. Wordlessly, he gestures at Kakashi, and then Izuna, and he gets the memo.

It takes him a second to think that this is really his life now. It's the second time Kurama has urged him to…to what? Collect whatever broken piece Izuna's left on that day?

It doesn't matter, Kakashi will do it regardless if Kurama tells him to. And he does it now, carefully scoops the Uchiha up into his arms, behind his knees and across the plane of his back, with a little boost of chakra, even though his own bones ache from all the *crazy shit* that's happened just today. His left knee nearly buckles, but then there's a clawed hand brushing his shoulder for just a moment and he gets a burst of chakra that scorches through his body in an instant and burns away all the tiredness, all the aches and pains, *everything,* wipes it clean in one fell swoop and leaves him vibrating under his skin.

He stares at Kurama as the man passes by without a second glance, watches as he bends down to scoop Izuna's katana that had ended up a few feet away from them. A blade that Izuna told him ages ago that only a select few people could ever lift. He doesn't know the emotion that races through him when he sees what Izuna's trust looks like clasped in Kurama's claws, then tucked at his waist.

Then the moment passes, and he's left carefully following the two jinchuuriki as they pick their way down the building and through the ruined streets. Kurama explains the lack of Mist shinobi, and his efforts to pull Isobu—Kakashi learns quickly that it's the Sanbi's *name,* and

something about him knowing it sits like a heavy stone in his gut—away from the more crowded area.

The Mizukage takes it all in stride, though his eyes grow sadder and sadder the farther inwards they travel. Kakashi finally starts to see signs of life around the edges of the destruction. People peeking out from their windows or from around corners. Farther in the shadows are the first shinobi he sees, and his back straightens automatically as he senses them and they sense him.

Kakashi holds Izuna tighter, presses him to his chest and curls around him. He suddenly understands why Izuna's always hunching into his cloak. It's like a shadow he can wrap around himself. But if he's a shadow, then Kurama sticks out like a flame in the darkness.

A group of shinobi finally peel away from their hiding spots and flicker down to kneel at their kage's feet. "Mizukage-sama…" The one in the front of their formation is stone cold. "We await your orders." It's said through clenched teeth. Kakashi tries not to think about the killing intent pulling itself around the bowing shinobi.

"I want a full damage and casualty report for both shinobi and…and civilians on my desk tomorrow morning, use as many shinobi as needed," then a series of hand signs Kakashi doesn't know. Movement happens all around them. Kakashi can't help the way he freezes, though Kurama seems utterly relaxed, almost leisurely in the way his eyes crawl over the hidden shinobi getting to work. He instead focuses on Izuna's heartbeat, a slow and steady pulse in time with his breath.

"And what of…of the…?" The man still kneeling briefly glances at Kurama and Kakashi. For some reason, Kurama startles, just a twitch, his hair spiking like a spooked cat, before he settles down again. But then he's curiously leaning forward, he's not super tall, but he still towers over the Mizukage's back, allowing for him to loom over the shinobi on his knee. But Kurama doesn't say anything, just peers down at the man before seemingly losing interest.

"We are to discuss their presence in my office. They are guests, I will take them up. No need for blood, Zabuza."

Kurama snorts. A short laugh escapes him and he doesn't even attempt to cover it. The shinobi looks at him with suspicion, and Kakashi remembers that face and that name in his bingo book. Zabuza Momochi….

Zabuza doesn't take his eyes from them as he slowly stands up. The squad follows, and then they step to the side to allow their kage and his odd procession continue along. There's something oddly reluctant in Zabuza's posture, in the way his eyes glare down at his kage. It sets Kakashi's nerves on edge as he passes by the man.

The burst of chakra Kurama has provided to him almost wears out entirely by the time they reach the Mizukage's office building. They're waved in tentatively by some chunin at the door, all of them weary-eyed and skittish, moreso whenever Kurama catches their eye. The Uzumaki doesn't even have to do anything in particular to get them moving, just glare down his nose at them and they'd run off without question.

Kakashi's arms ache, but he holds fast. Izuna is still out cold, though the genjutsu Kakashi put him under broke ages ago. The Mizukage looks back at him as they enter the building. "We keep rooms for foreign delegates on the third floor, I'll have my medic-nin take your teammate."

Kakashi flashes a look of panic at Kurama. The Mizukage catches it easily. "He'll be fine."

"I'm more worried about your medic-nin," Kurama says with a shrug. "If he wakes without a known face around…well."

The Mizukage considers this. "Then we will meet in your assigned room."

The shinobi around them do not like this, but no one protests their Mizukage as he takes an abrupt turn and leads them farther into the building, then up two flights of stairs. Kakashi ends up being flanked by two jonin, while their medic-nin brings up the rear of their party. Kakashi wants to insist that Izuna is fine. There shouldn't be a foreign shinobi snooping around him, medic or not. He keeps those thoughts to himself. Afterall…Izuna is not a Konoha shinobi. His fate lies with…Kakashi eyes the back of Kurama's head, his mane of red hair swaying in a heap of spikes and tangles. He can't believe that Kurama would willingly take the mantle of kage that he spat upon not too long ago.

Kakashi's not entirely convinced, hasn't been since Izuna uttered those dreadful words, that Kurama actually conceded to claiming the title, and responsibility of Uzukage, but what's done is done.

They make their way to the third floor, and turn into an empty hallway with a few rooms on either side. The architecture is fairly old-school, with thick shoji doors and tatami mats lining the floors. When they step into the room that's been arranged for them, the medic-nin immediately skirts around him and directs him to lay Izuna down on one of the futons. He does so, kneeling next to Izuna even when Kurama and the Mizukage take a step back. The Mizukage gives Izuna a once over with an intense stare, before he gestures for Kurama to sit at the opposite end of the room where a low table is placed, surrounded by sitting cushions.

The two don't talk, no one does, as the medic-nin does her job. She first checks his heart rate and breathing, then systematically goes over his physical wounds. She pauses for a long time at the massive scar that swirls around Izuna's side, and then the fresh one on top of it, but continues.

'Why did he fall unconscious? It wasn't a head injury, was it?" She says suddenly.

Kakashi's mouth moves without sound for a second as he fumbles. He looks at Kurama, who only raises an eyebrow. *Bastard.* "I…No. Genjutsu."

"Is it still active?"

"No."

She hums. "Well…then I suppose he'll wake up eventually. This is all I can do. Whoever healed him knew what they were doing." Kakashi doesn't need to look at Kurama to know

he's smirking.

The medic-nin stands, turns, and gives a curt bow to the Mizukage, then she takes her leave. The Mizukage also waves out the other two jonin, but they don't go too far, stopping just outside the door after they shut it behind them. There's a careful beat of silence after that. Kakashi sweeps his gaze from Izuna's unconscious face to Kurama's red eyes, which glow like burning coals in the growing darkness, to the Mizukage's mildly collected self.

"I suppose you'll want to stay until your… *friend* wakes up?" The Mizukage says. The word *friend* is oddly put, like he can't believe he's saying such a word. Kakashi almost answers, then realizes quickly that he's not the one being spoken to.

Kurama tilts his head in a way to gain the upper hand in the conversation, and he takes hold of their attention with it. Kakashi can understand the appeal of following such a man. He knows that Izuna is the *Yokai,* so what does that make Kurama?

Some sort of *Kami?*

"It shouldn't take more than a day," Kurama answers diplomatically. The Mizukage studies him, then turns his cold eyes onto Izuna.

Kakashi has to keep himself from tensing up at that. There's open contempt there. A scowl crawls its way up the young kage's face. Kakashi tries to reason with himself that the Mizukage just went through something incredibly traumatic at the hands of an Uchiha. A…A *rogue* Uchiha. One that claims a wretched name and serves a wretched cause.

The Mizukage sniffs pointedly, his critical gaze sweeps over Izuna once more before he turns back to Kurama. "How can you trust him?"

"We have a shared past, and shared dream. I trust him with my life…and the lives of my brethren."

That causes the Mizukage's icy visage to crack, just a hare. He grows quiet and still, staring off into the middle distance. Then, "Isobu urges me to believe you…" The Mizukage studies him more closely. "So what my bijuu says about you is true?" Kurama nods. "And what of your Uchiha, does he know?"

Your Uchiha…

That causes Kurama to scoff. "I should hope so, he saw it happen." Kurama picks at the end of his claws. The words cause a silence to descend down into the room, near suffocating. Kakashi doesn't have the right context to know the events that had taken place, but he knows it's something horrific judging from the reaction, and Kurama's normally lively being seems to bleed into his environment until even his chakra becomes subdued.

"You'd look him in the eyes, knowing what he could do to you? What he could *make* you do?" The Mizukage hisses, his tone bitter.

"I would. I have. Even when he wanted to kill me."

“And what does he do?”

Kurama pauses, his nail taps the wooden table quietly. He sighs, eyes bright and filled with their infinite sadness. “He looks away.”

The Mizukage shakes his head, a mean smile splits his face for just a second. “I’d pay to see an Uchiha effectively cowed.”

Kakashi has seen it. It’s a strange sight indeed. Uchiha, even the even tempered ones like Itachi, are not ones to back away from eye contact when someone else initiates it. But he *has* seen Izuna do just that, and he’s seen Izuna defy Kurama, and he now knows that Izuna will drop everything if Kurama calls for him, without knowing where he’ll land, or the risks it’ll put him in.

Kakashi called it blind loyalty. Once. Until he arrived on Uzushio and saw the life that Kurama was starting to cobble together for Naruto and the other jinchuuriki kids. He would if he hadn’t eaten by their bonfire and listened to Kurama’s stories about life and death and love. He would if he didn’t realize that Izuna’s loyalty wasn’t to Kurama himself—not exactly—but it was both their loyalties to something greater that kept them bound like this.

And at moments Kakashi felt that something was rather *someone.* A ghost. As Izuna had said what felt like an eternity ago.

“For a yokai, he looks remarkably human,” The Mizukage mutters.

That’s because you’ve never seen him fight. But then again…maybe to a jinchuuriki who could turn themself into a *real* monster, Izuna is tame in comparison. “Isobu is too forgiving, but we’ll take your word.”

The Mizukage still had more questions, of course. Ones about him, but he could tell he was not permitted to speak on his own behalf. His fate is completely in Kurama’s clawed hands. “What should we call this one?” He asks Kurama.

Kurama turns to him and raises a brow without a word.

“I go by Wolf.” Kakashi mutters, already not liking where this is going. Yes, the Mizukage made him hide his identity for now, to not cause a stir among his own shinobi, but any second now he could decide that Kakashi isn’t worth the effort, even if he *did* save his life.

“Wolf then-” he turns pointedly away from Kakashi, effectively shutting him out of the conversation. “What’s he doing here, anyway?”

Kurama shrugs. Kakashi finds himself inching closer to Izuna, as if he could protect him even while unconscious. Then he forces himself to stop. He doesn’t need someone to protect him. If things go south, he’ll…he’ll have to leave. Out the window, surely. There’s no seals along the frame, but there *could* be a trap waiting on the other side. If he goes through the shoji doors, he’ll have to contend with the two jonin, but he *knows* the door isn’t trapped. How far could he get with two fully fledged jinchuuriki on his tail?

“It seems Izuna has picked up a rather clingy burr,” Kurama leans back and crosses his arms, looking mildly amused by this fact. Kakashi does not entertain them with the outrage trying to make itself known upon his face “....who just so happened to help save your life.” He keeps himself utterly still, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Ah. I should probably mention this before it slips my mind, but I’ve been made Uzukage.”

Well. that is not the shoe Kakashi had expected. Neither did the Mizukage, based on the way his eyes widened for just a second. “Do you even have enough shinobi to consider yourself a village?”

“Enough to have allied Uzushio and Konoha.” Kurama says evenly, And *shit.* Kakashi lets out a breath. Kurama had just effectively pulled him under his protection. “But I don’t plan on fighting their wars, if they start any. I’m neutral in the affairs of inter-village politics, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Then what benefit do either of you gain from this?”

“I don’t fuckin’ know, it was that idiot kid’s idea,” Kurama jabs a thumb at Izuna. Kakashi *knew it.* Izuna’s declaration in the Hokage’s office was a total *lie.* “Ask him when he wakes up, I’m sure he’s a lot more eloquent about it than I am.”

“Then…why didn’t you make *him* Uzukage?”

“I tried, y’know. But he didn’t want it. Besides…” Kurama frowns. “I’m…an Uzumaki-” that causes the Mizukage’s eyebrows to shoot up. Had he not known? It’s so obvious. “-Uzushio is *mine.”*

“That’s quite the declaration for someone of your…status,” The Mizukage mulls over the new information slowly. “Still…You?... *Konoha?”*

“I have my reasons.” Kurama sniffs. His already slitted pupils narrow further for a heartbeat before they return to normal. Kakashi interprets it as a warning. He tries not to think about it too hard. Not too long ago, Kurama spat on Konoha’s name. Kurama *stole* their jinchuuriki, and now here they are.

Kurama changes the subject then, clearly growing restless with all the needling. “Tell me what happened.”

“With that *bastard* Uchiha?” The Mizukage’s chakra suddenly flares, a deathly cold wave of sanbi chakra that absolutely pierces through Kakashi’s soul. He can hear bones crunching around his arm, feel the weight of a body. Warm blood, dead eyes, the smell of lightning and charred meat—Kakashi blinks, focuses his vision on the rise and fall of Izuna’s chest and keeps it there. A different night, different eyes staring at him, a different heartbeat under his palm, breathing, warm, and alive.

He can feel a small trickle of blood fall from his covered eye.

“There’s nothing to tell,” the Mizukage continues, “He crawled into my mind, took it over, I couldn’t do anything but watch as my village turned to chaos under me. Whenever I wanted to go against it, it felt like I was going to be ripped out of my own body. And Isobu…I couldn’t get to him within our mindscape. I was chained down and he was left to roam an endless void-”

Kakashi remembers his own genjutsu snapping apart those chains, and piece by piece dismantling the void. It had taken a great deal of concentration just to perform. His mangekyou had been activated the whole time. His own hellscape crowding around, trying to break through, to trap him in that horrible memory. In the end, he couldn’t break through the final few chains, and Kurama had to come in with what appeared to be a black hole held in the palm of his hand that knocked the Sanbi right out and destroyed the last vestiges the genjutsu had.

“-it was horrible. I want that man dead if you didn’t kill him already.”

“He got away from us,” Kurama scowls deeply, a sneer pulling at his lip, “But I doubt he’ll just crawl into his cave and hide. Izuna’s backing him into a corner. He’ll lash out again, and soon.”

“Good.” The Mizukage’s eyes gleam dangerously. “I’d say I’d help you, but I need to sort out the mess I’ve caused.”

“I don’t want you to help me,” Kurama says, “the best thing you can do is keep yourself from getting killed.”

“Duly noted.”

And then Kurama starts pushing his luck. Even Kakashi knows he’s about to say something insane by the glint in his eye and the way his claws drum on the table before them. “The protection of the Jinchuuriki is paramount, Utakata and Saiken have agreed they’d be safer with me. In Uzushio.”

The Mizukage blinks. Then blinks again. Then there’s another wave of piercing cold chakra. Kakashi braces for it this time, and allows himself to breathe out slowly. He turns his attention away from the barely veiled anger radiating from the Mizukage and instead decides the perfect distraction is counting Izuna’s eyelashes. He has nice eyelashes.

“Ah…I *see.”* The mizukage says through clenched teeth. “ *Very well then.”*

“And I have this.” From the corner of Kakashi’s eye, he sees Kurama produce a scroll from a seal on his forearm. It’s a very familiar scroll that Kakashi has definitely seen somewhere before. “This is your akatsuki missing-nin, and-” Kurama unrolls the first seal, and a heavy weight drops to the ground with a clatter. “-Kubikiribocho.”

“This is not a fair trade, Kurama. No Jinchuuriki is worth-”

“No.” Kurama stops him there, Kakashi can hear the scrape of his claws gripping into the wooden table.. “Utakata will go where he wishes. It’s not up to either of us to decide that.”

The Mizukage sounds like he's about to protest, but Kurama commands the room now. Kakashi gets the impression of an older sibling scolding the younger. "You know it's the truth, you *know* it in your soul. I was told that I should get paid for turning in a bounty like this, along with one of your precious seven swords."

Izuna definitely told him to do that.

"These are worth a lot…" The Mizukage relents, albeit reluctantly, "I'll…" He sighs heavily, "I guess you did just save my life."

"And a good chunk of your village."

"...And that." The Mizukage huff irateably. "Fine. Fine! We'll draw up the bounty sum from the latest bingo book."

He goes to take the scroll, but Kurama's fingers curl around it. "I'll give it to you when I see the money."

"Ah don't you trust me, your brethren?" Kakashi can hear the smile, stained sharp with sarcasm.

"I trust you with my life, just not with this."

"Oh alright," The Mizukage stands. On reaction alone, Kakashi does the same. "I'll draft it up in the morning. I'll have dinner brought to you, doubt any of the shops will be open after all…this." He sighs heavily once again, looking twice his age for a second. "I want to sleep for a thousand years, and forget this ever happened. I'll see you tomorrow." The Mizukage nods to Kurama, then sweeps out of the room without a second glance to Kakashi. The jonin waiting at the door leave with him, but Kakashi is under no impression that they're alone.

Kurama, for his part, shuts his eyes and puts his face into his hands for a good ten seconds, contemplating, breathing, processing. To Kakashi, he has never looked more real than those ten seconds. Then he stands briskly, makes his way to each corner of the room to place a seal. Once he's done, he stands in the middle and flares his chakra. Kakashi can feel the slight change of air pressure for a split second, like a wave of warm heat pulsing through his body before it dissipates again.

"Soundproofing," Kurama explains to him as he stalks to the window and rips it open. "It'll work even like this," He leans against the frame, looking out into the night. There's a cold and damp breeze that wafts through, causing him to shiver. Kurama doesn't seem to feel it.

Kakashi can't help but stare at him, trying to figure him out. He's just as elusive as the first time they met. The day where Kakashi's world melted apart like snow under a flame. He always appears carefree in the way true power makes a person, but not restless, nor at peace. The only way Kakashi can think of him is…wild, animalistic in all his qualities. And he's seen a lot of shinobi embody the traits of various animals for various reasons. Hell, Izuna had just killed one of those people this very day.

But Kurama…Kakashi can't help but feel like he's in the presence of something *truly, terribly* inhuman.

"I can hear you thinking," Kurama mutters. His head turns, eyes dragging to stare down into his soul. The low light illuminates the red in his eyes, the black slit of his pupil like a knife through his soul. All the hairs on his neck stand on end. He finds himself leaning closer to Izuna. "I know you have your questions. But I *also* have a question." Kurama tilts his head, his eyes never leaving him for a second.

Kakashi swallows down the rising fear that's threatening to consume him. "What would you like to know?" He answers with his best tilted head and upturned eye-smile he can muster.

Kurama somehow likes this answer, for he scoffs, rolls his eyes and allows Kakashi a slight reprieve from his intensity. He instead looks down at Izuna, his eyes softening just a hare. Kakashi's certain Kurama has no idea what he looks like just then, like he's truly *fond* of Izuna. Something that's not fear—something much more tainted and evil—twists in his gut. He tamps it back down guiltily. It not his place to feel those kinds of things.

It's not his place to feel anything, really.

"Why *are* you here, actually?" Kurama doesn't hold back though. Kakashi has no idea how to answer that question either. In that split second, he had just known he had to reach forward or Izuna would be lost to him. Kakashi is not exactly known for being that reckless. It shocks him in hindsight that he did such a stupid thing, but in the moment…it had felt like the only option he had. Like Izuna would disappear and never return, and if that happened…what then? But to what end? Whatever Kakashi does know about his own motive, he sure as hell will not tell Kurama of all people.

So he shrugs, looks at Izuna as if it'll save him.

Kurama chuckles quietly. "Oh, I've seen that look a thousand times," He says, and Kakashi immediately looks at the wall instead, cursing his lack of anbu mask. But how perceptive could Kurama be to read him like an open book when all the Uzumaki can see of his face is one eye? The man has no sharingan to his name. Unless Kakashi really *is* that obvious.

"What look are you talking about?" Kakashi asks lightly, going for a paper thin smile.

Kurama only blinks at him, the start of a smirk curling across his features. He lifts one of his fiery brows and tilts back his head the way Izuna does when he's acting smug. Kakashi wonders then who learned the behavior from who.

"You look at that brat like you want to kill him." Kakashi doesn't get a chance to protest, "Like you can't stand the sight of him, like he's not worth the trouble he causes you, and he's causes you a *lot* of trouble." Kakashi would scoff at it if it didn't stick in his throat instead, if it were a misjudgement. But it's the truth and both of them know it.

"-Like regardless of all that you can't let him out of your sight, and you don't understand why it *had* to be him." Kurama's leer grows softer, and his eyes flit about the room like he's seeing something that Kakashi can't. He looks out the window, for a second. "You look at

that fool like he's the moon and all the stars," Kurama's glowing eyes flick to him once again, catching him off guard in their bright intensity, "and you're a creature living in darkness."

Kakashi shakes his head, just slightly, before his mind can even find the words to rebuttal the truth with some feeble lie or another. His heart isn't in it though, misaligned with whatever the rest of him wants to say to Kurama. There's a *lot* to say, he knows this. He could spit the fact back at him, because Kakashi's no fool even if he doesn't have all the details, and he *knows* there's something between the two that neither of them will acknowledge. And Kakashi sure as hell won't for his own sanity and self preservation.

But Kurama's words bring all those things to the surface, like he's yanking on all the emotions buried deep, tugging on the invisible wires, ripping each one out of Kakashi's heart to examine them. Kakashi wants to dig under the ground and bury himself along with those accursed things that shinobi should never feel.

"It doesn't matter," He says, feels it like scorching claws ripping through his chest, frost biting through his mask, rippling words through his ears. *Izuna's sharingan, spinning tomoe.* "I won't interfere again."

Kurama sits up from the wall and stalks over to him, much to Kakashi's dismay. He doesn't stop until he looms over Kakashi. Even in the chill, the Uzumaki radiates heat like an eternal flame, and Kakashi has to wonder if Kurama and Izuna could set the world ablaze with their combined fire.

"If that's the truth, then you'll tell that to the brat's face when he wakes up," Kurama pulls himself out of Kakashi's personal space, takes the heat with him and an icy chill settles down in his bones. "But we all know it's a lie."

"I'm a shinobi…it's what I do." Kakashi all but whispers, if only to convince himself.

"Then why are you so incessant to know the truth?"

"Who wouldn't be?"

Kurama huffs, an eyeroll and retaliation waiting on the tip of his tongue when he pauses. Kakashi stiffens too, he looks around the room, casting his senses out but gets nothing in return. Everything is as it has been. "What?" He asks, now on high alert, his muscles twinge at the idea of another battle so soon after the last. Kurama's eye's zero in on Izuna, and Kakashi whips his head around to find the Uchiha exactly how they've left him; gone to the world. *Only*... Kakashi squints at him. He itches to pull away the bandage wrapped around his sharingan to see if Izuna's breathing has changed, or if the slight twitch of his lashes is anything other than restless sleep.

But Kurama knows already, *How can he tell?*

"Already awake, you sonovabitch," Kurama snarks, alighting the room with his fiery chakra once again. Kakashi watches as Izuna's brow wrinkles, then he lets out a long held sigh.

He's awake? For how long? How much did he-

"What happened?" Izuna asks, his eyes remain stubbornly closed. Kurama notices it too, something heavy settling over his face when he realizes.

"Is that how it's gonna be?" Kurama spits as Kakashi answers the question.

"Madara stabbed you."

"He…"Izuna's hand goes to his side, ignoring Kurama's question. He scoffs, throws himself farther into the futon as if he's trying to sink into the floor. "Of course he did."

"You were-" A clawed hand digs into his shoulder, silencing him. Kurama leans in close, Izuna automatically shrinks away as if he's being burned.

"Tell me kid, is this how you're gonna act right now?" Kurama is hissing, *spitting* with rage that Kakashi hasn't seen since *that* night in the snow. *"Look at me!"* He snarls with so much force that Kakashi can't help the way he flinches like a petrified genin.

He watches as Izuna stubbornly keeps his eyes shut, with his jaw clenched tight. "I…I can't." He whispers between his teeth.

Kurama sits up, his face a twisting storm of unsorted emotion that Kakashi will spend the rest of the week picking apart in his head. "Be that way, brat. Don't ever say I did nothing for you."

Kurama leaves, like a flame flickering out through the window, just as Izuna hisses, "I'd never." Kakashi is sure Kurama had missed it. Else the Uzumaki would've stopped, surely? He would've come back and said something insane the way the two tend to do.

But he vanishes into the night. Kakashi lurches to his feet and rushes to the window, but he can't catch a glimpse of where he's gone. There's only darkness, the moon, and the chilly wind that promises winter.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah so I vanished for a while lmao, sorry about that. It turns out that doing two exhibitions, a fashion show, learning a whole new art skill set and making a cosplay from scratch all in one semester is a lot to handle and some things had to go by the wayside haha! (I cosplayed Haku btw)

But in reality, this chapter has been in draft hell since janurary and I haven't had the time or energy to pull it out until today so now!! She's ready and done, though I wish I could've fit a little more, I feel like this was a good ending to the Chapter! I know it sucks to have to wait so long for these to come out, but we are closing in towards the

final arc of the fic!! I have the ending planned and art done for it and everything so it's gonna happen! I know you guys can't see the finish line but I can!!

The Worst of All Blessings

Chapter Notes

> Hi yep its been a while oops. Ok to be fair I have been very busy and life is just. Life sometimes. No I don't know when I'll have the next chapter, uhhhh, life's about to get crazy again for me so we'll see lmao

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kakashi allows himself a brief second to gather his thoughts as he stares out across Kiri's dark and mist-shrouded village. What makes him return to himself is the slight shift of a blanket, and he turns around to find Izuna slowly sitting up. His dark hair creates a curtain around his face, and he puts a hand up to his eyes. Kakashi approaches him noisily, so much so that Izuna realizes what he's doing and gives a sad huff of amusement.

He's cautious right now, Kakashi would be stupid to not be. Still, he settles back down by Izuna's side. "He's gone off somewhere," He says, aiming for a passive tone, but it comes across as timid, even to his own ears.

He watches Izuna intently, watches the way his hair falls over his shoulder, the way he breathes in heaving sighs like he's trying to keep himself contained in a too small space, and Kakashi is struck so suddenly, like lightning, that Izuna nearly died. That he would have. That he was slipping away right before his eyes and Kakashi could do *nothing* to stop it.

"He's probably gone to find Saiken." Izuna says, as if he wasn't bleeding out an hour or two ago.

Saiken. Kurama mentioned them to The Mizukage earlier. He files the name away for later, but he could barely muster the energy to be curious about it when all his mind can focus on is how Izuna's breathing and talking and sitting up and how dead he almost was. It burns like the sun in the front of his mind.

He's not expecting it then, when Izuna pulls his hand away from his face and finally turns towards him. He's not really all there, at that moment. *Kakashi is dead,* He's thinking when Izuna looks at him and he can register the flash of confusion. And then Izuna's eyes, both black onyx and glowing purple, land on the swath of bandages concealing his sharingan.

"Who did this?" Izuna hisses like it's a threat. His hand comes up, and Kakashi stills when he feels fingers brush the side of his face. But, *no,* that's the wrong reaction, he can tell, Izuna goes to pull away when he realizes, when he sees Kakashi freeze but he doesn't *want him to.* So Kakashi decides right then, and perhaps he's crazy, perhaps he can't care anymore about all his hesitations, his *fears*— because Izuna nearly died and Kakashi did *nothing*— So he leans into Izuna's touch instead.

“Who’s eye do I need to rip out?” Izuna’s thumb grazes the edge of bandages, the edge of his *mask,* and it must do something to Kakashi’s brain because he can’t think of a way to tell him it’s just a disguise. He’s not sure Izuna realizes what he’s doing based on the way he seethes. “Did *Madara-”*

“Kurama, he-”

“He what?”

“He thought I should wear a disguise.” Kakashi says, trying to keep his voice level in the wake of Izuna’s righteous fury, Fury for *him.* But he has to keep a cool head, even when Izuna’s eyes rake over him from head to toe, taking in his hair, eye, and to Kakashi utter mortification, Izuna’s cloak still hanging around his shoulders.

“What was all of that about, with Kurama?” He asks, and Izuna’s face twists just as he predicts. “He saved your life.” *Speaking of, you could have died.* Kakashi doesn’t voice that, not yet. “What…happened?”

Izuna’s hand comes away from his jaw, and Kakashi regrets saying anything. Izuna keeps his mouth shut, just glares at him until the silence becomes unbearable. Kakashi knows this game at least, and he can play it just as well. He tilts his head, imploring him to answer.

Instead, Izuna just huffs out a breath, leans back onto the wall, suddenly looking down at him. “I didn’t think you’d be reckless enough to do what you did.”

“Don’t try to change the subject.” Too many times Izuna’s actions have no consequence. Just once, Kakashi would like to get away with being foolish. “We can talk about me later,” He relents, he’ll play the fucking game for once. “Deal?”

The ice in Izuna’s eyes—black onyx, glowing amethyst—thaws; a crack in his porcelain visage. Kakashi has seen it before, by the river, alone in Uzushio, in his own damn bedroom that felt untethered from reality. But he can tell this is hard for Izuna, even more difficult than his confession of his family’s murder, of his brother. Then…the only person who could cause that much pain in Izuna is…his nameless soulmate.

As if to prove his own thoughts right, Izuna looks to the window. His hand rubs at his shoulder, wincing. It’s the one that keeps him tethered to Kurama across time and space, and then he stares down at a faint crescent tattoo in the palm of his hand.

“Sometimes…when things go wrong, or even when they go perfectly I suppose…I forget that Kurama’s not… *him,”* Izuna smiles to himself, something quiet and self-deprecating. Kakashi’s heart beats like a drum, but somehow not at all. He’s holding his breath as Izuna continues. “Sometimes though, it’s *all* I can think about.”

“When you were dying…you thought Kurama was your soulmate.” It’s not a question. It weighs heavily in the air, in his soul. He wonders what he’d do if he saw Obito everywhere. If he saw Rin in the faces of his friends now…and even then could it compare? They were his friends. His teammates. But he’d been isolated, alone even back then. He’d cornered himself off from any unnecessary emotion, never allowed another to get that close.

Looking at Izuna now, he can't help but think that he's spared himself the heartache. But deep down, in his soul, he knows that's not how it works. Death haunts him regardless. It still hurts, aches like the strain in his eye, like a hollow in his chest that he can't fill. And Kakashi's filled with all these…regrets and what ifs that choke him in his sleep.

"It's not fair, is it? To Kurama….To myself." Izuna shrugs, his voice pitching to a whisper, "I was supposed to die that day."

There's a ton of rocks pouring over his head, the rumble of the earth coming from all directions, His eye is bleeding, throbbing in his brain, he sees the sharp features of a half-dead face, bright and searing into his memory like a brad, and he's being shoved, and he's crying, sobbing, screaming over something already done. It should be him. He was supposed to die that day.

Kakashi instinctively goes to cover his sharingan. The movement is not lost on Izuna. "And you thought I was dead too?" he can't help but ask, to pry, to save himself from his own thoughts. Perhaps it's a selfish question. Unfair.

"I guess you were," Izuna scoffs, "I guess…a lot of people were. Guess I wanted to join them." Izuna shakes his head, just a tiny fraction of a movement.

He's lying. Kakashi can practically taste the feeble half truth that Izuna smiles around, and that subtle gleam in his eyes when he thinks he's being deceiving, when he speaks about his past, about the cosmic joke that Kakashi can never understand. So he lets himself breathe, lets himself sit on Izuna's half-truth and decides to tuck it away with all the little half-lies. There's a whole filing cabinet's worth locked away in Kakashi's mind. Sooner or later, he'll either figure it out or Izuna will tell him.

"I think you're one of the good guys. For what it's worth," Kakashi says. He thinks of the mischievous grin while his foxes chase around his cloak, or the infinitely soft look he reserves for Naruto and Naruto alone, his strange patience with Fuu while they were traveling, his willingness to share his family jutsu with her. *If he gives up his half-lies, will he still be like that? Would he let me see that?*

"And I know you're trying to protect us…probably from ourselves at this point." Kakashi remembers those portals. Being flung out beyond Izuna's seals, out of harm's way, so he could fight Orochimaru alone. A stupid move, but Kakashi understands that too. And said under the guise of slowing him down.

Izuna's eyes narrow just a fraction.

"And I…" Kakashi releases his own. "I guess I followed you because–well…I think…" The words tumble, trip over themselves. Kakashi focuses on a small peel of wallpaper just left of Izuna's head. "...I believe in you."

He does not miss the way the room seems to drop out of existence. He allows himself to look at Izuna. To see his mismatched eyes widen just a hair. See his breath hitch. His whole body stilled as if he were carved from stone.

“I know that you want to do this all alone. And I had this…feeling…that if I just. Let you go. Then maybe it would be for the last time. Maybe, you would never come back. Maybe, I’d never have another fox with another letter. Maybe, I would never figure out if you died or not. But either way, if you never came back then you’d just be a ghost to me.” The truth stings, claws at his heart like barbed wire. He fought long and hard to become strong. His whole life became a battlefield, and he became a honed edge. Kakashi knew his strength. But Izuna had all of that too. Had more of it; More pain, more love, more hate, more joy. “And I knew right then, that I did not have the power to make you stay. But for once… *just this once,* I had the power to come with you. ”

There’s a pause in the air, as Kakashi’s words soak into the space around them. Then, Izuna reaches out, beckons him forward like he does with Itachi. Kakashi shuffles closer, sits left of Izuna’s folded up legs and waits, his heart thundering in his throat.

“I kept pushing you away and…and pulling you closer,” Izuna says, his voice tight. He pulls into himself, retreating like he’s prone to do. It's the easy thing to do. Kakashi is the same way. To lower your head, to cover your face, to draw inward until you’re a speck. A fly on the wall. Inconsequential. “I honestly never thought you’d…” he smiles to himself, “be so reckless.” There’s another untold joke there, one he’ll never understand. Is he okay with that? He needs to think about this…critically.

Izuna looks at him. Kakashi can’t form a coherent thought. “I think you should get some rest.” Kakashi glances around the cold, forlorn room. He shivers just thinking about what's on the other side of the door. The paper thin walls don’t hide them as well as he likes. “I’ll keep watch,” Izuna offers. He feels a soft nudge to his shoulder, “I know you’re dead on your feet.”

“I’m okay. You should be resting too. You…” *Almost died,* Kakashi can’t help but flick his eye to where the wound had been. Izuna’s arm comes around his middle like he’s trying to hide the impressive blood stain that dyes his entire front a dark ruby.

“I already got my nap, now it’s your turn.” Another nudge, a little harder. Izuna even shoves a blanket into his lap. “Go to sleep, I’ll wake you in four hours, hn?”

He figures he’s not getting out of this. Izuna clearly is done talking, with the way he’s changed the subject. Kakashi assesses himself, finds that he *is* exhausted. The tiny chakra boost Kurama gave him seemed to have healed a few minor bumps and scrapes he’d gotten, but it did nothing but temporarily relieve the weight of total and utter exhaustion. The adrenaline has worn off too, and now even his skin feels heavy on his bones.

He lays down then, next to Izuna still sitting with his back pressed to the wall. The futon is soft and warm, much better than the thin bedroll he’d been sleeping on for a week before the Orochimaru raid. The blanket is even warmer and softer…and it smells like Izuna. He resists the urge to bury his face in it, because that would be *insane.* Instead, he glares up at the man himself.

“Four hours.” He stresses. When Izuna nods, he closes his eyes and promptly passes out.

* * *

He wakes slowly, which is a first, to the faint sounds of seagulls. He's warm, almost too warm, in that stifling kind of way from a cold night and too many blankets being heated by the sun. There's sunlight like a red bloom behind one of his eyes, and he knows it's been more than four hours because the *sun* is *shining* through the window.

He nearly gets up then and there, to yell at Izuna, to switch their places, but when he pries his eye open, sticky from sleep, he's greeted to the sight of Izuna's sleeping face mere inches from his own. He bites down on his tongue to keep from making a noise.

Is he stupid? Another shot of panic nearly forces him to sit up, even as he catches the sight of pure golden sunlight turning Izuna's inky black hair to a faint reddish brown. His brow twitches, a tiny frown appears on his mouth before it smoothes out again, and Kakashi cannot speak a word, move a muscle, only stare at man as if he were some otherworldly creature.

Do I love him? Could I, even if he's a liar? Then again, who in this world tells the truth.

The faint sound of a footstep bringing him out of the moment. He fiddles for a kunai knife that he keeps strapped to his arm for a brief second, grips it tight in his hand as the worst case scenario starts to play out in his head. Kakashi gathers himself, first he checks for another sound, pinpoints the person's exact location within the room, then he lets himself inhale and…he stops.

It's Kurama. He'd recognize that man a mile away by the smell of him alone. He smells a lot like Karasu, a little like Naruto, and overwhelmingly like Kyuubi.

He lets out a cautious breath, relaxes his kunai arm. He hears Kurama sit down at the low table, and mutter something that doesn't sound like a real language. There's the shuffle of a scroll unraveling, an inkwell uncorking, and careful brush strokes follow in a rhythmic pattern.

He debates if he should move or not. Izuna sniffs in his sleep, his nose scrunches for a second, and then he's curling into the blanket he has cocooned himself in. Kakashi has to look away before his heart betrays him again.

He carefully peels himself away from Izuna, then sits up and tries not to stare at the sight of Kurama. The Uzumaki's half-torn haori is nowhere in sight, instead he sees the expanse of his bare back with the massive seal spiraling out of his left shoulder; the same one as Izuna. He knew that, logically, of course, but to see it was a whole different thing. There's not a single scar on him either, which was…well, even Izuna had scars all over him, from tiny nicks on his fingers to slashes on his arms and legs to the massive maelstrom twisted into his side. But Kurama is completely and utterly pristine, like he's never seen a fight in his life.

Kakashi swears he saw Kurama get clipped by the Sanbi's claws at least once during their fight yesterday.

"Food's over here if you're hungry," Kurama mutters suddenly. Kakashi has enough control over himself to *not* flinch, and he's not stupid enough to ask how Kurama knows he's awake.

He shuffles over to him like a cat approaching a stranger. Kurama doesn't look up from his careful brushstrokes. He's got one clawed hand curled into a half fist, with his cheek resting on it. He holds the brush almost lazily, but Kakashi watches as he expertly flicks the ink across the page into some incomprehensible pattern.

Sure enough, there's a small bowl of rice with half a grilled fish on top, another bowl holds an assortment of pickled vegetables. He picks up his chopsticks, then looks at Kurama, who does not acknowledge his presence at all. Kakashi still doesn't risk it, and goes through his routine of taking small and fast bites. He catches Kurama's face morphing into the tiniest of grins and can't help thinking it's because of him, though the man doesn't move his posture in the slightest.

The rice is cold and the fish is starting to get that filmy texture it gets when it's out for slightly too long. He picks a thin bone out from between the meat and places it to the side. It gives him a chance to glance down at Kurama's scroll again. He wishes his sharingan wasn't so tightly wrapped so he could get a good look at it. From what he can tell, its the beginning of some sort of contract. Hm. Maybe it's a letter for Konoha.

Apparently he stares just a little too long and Kurama's brush pauses. He looks back down at his bowl, and Kurama continues as if nothing happened. Kakashi keeps his looks much more brief in between bites of fish, rice, and vegetables. Not once does Kurama steal a glance at him. It's a rare occasion where someone doesn't try to see his face like that. The only time he can recall recently was…when he and Izuna were taking Fuu across the country.

He remembers Jiraiya trying several times to sneak a peek at him over the bonfire in Uzushio, and Shisui cannot keep to himself *ever.* There's even occasions where Itachi will glance over for a split second, though Kakashi is under no false pretenses that Itachi hasn't gotten a look at him with his sharingan.

He squints into the open window sunlight. There's thin particles of dust floating peacefully, swirling slightly in the sea breeze. He can hear seagulls faintly, the slight rustle of the wind, of Izuna shifting in his sleep, the drag of brush on fabric page, Kurama's subtle hums that sound almost like a purr. Kakashi decides to never mention that last one.

It's oddly and deceptively *calm,* and he doesn't know exactly where to place all the pent up anxiety he had a few minutes ago. He eats rather slowly, or he takes a bite and waits awhile before taking another. He refrains from turning to Kurama like that man has the answers. Once or twice he can't help but look over at Izuna's sleeping form. He's curled up on his side like a cat, with his face completely obscured by the tangled mess of his hair.

After the third glance, Kurama hisses at him, literally, then spits, "Go sit on the roof if you're gonna be this jumpy."

"I'm not being jumpy," Kakashi denies. The hiss alone had spiked his heartrate up so high, he thought he might pass out from the adrenaline rush. Kurama doesn't say anything else, just huffs at him like he's being a fussy genin, and goes back to his work.

The question is on the tip of his tongue now that Kurama has broken their strange silence. He still can't manage to spit it out though, so he just wills Kurama to speak again while he

pretends to eat rice one grain at a time.

“I’m not tellin’ you what this is, if you’re trying to implore me to share.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

Kurama actually smirks at that, his eyes never leave the scroll. “Of course you’re not.” Kakashi gets the impression of a beast lying in wait, feigning disinterest to strike when he least expects. Or…maybe that’s not right. There’s a memory here, something faint and dusty that he can’t quite decipher. But he’s seen this before, seen it several times.

So Kakashi asks a different question. “Who is Saiken?”

That gets Kurama to pause, and Kakashi mentally chalks that up as a win for himself. Red eyes squint down at his writing, then his expression smooths out. “He is the Rokubi.”

Rokubi. The grain of rice falls from his chopsticks and onto the table. “Is…is he going with us?”

Kurama’s hand stills completely. Kakashi catches the way his eyes dart back and forth, slowly parsing through Kakashi’s words and… *shit.* Kakashi catches his mistake just as Kurama tilts his head up and squints at him, bemused.

“‘Us?’”

“I mean…” Kakashi doesn’t know what he means. He’s not sure what’s going to happen to him when they inevitably leave this room. When they go out into the world, Kurama will go back to his little island. Izuna will either join him and leave Kakashi behind or…or what? Come back to Konoha? And what about him abandoning his mission to chase after Izuna? What about the complete and utter breakdown of their encounter with Orochimaru? It had to have been partly his fault, for not figuring it out sooner. In the end he got it, but too little, too late.

Kurama watches him. His brush lowers, dripping ink onto his lettering, which only makes Kakashi more nervous. He doesn't try to stumble out an excuse, and refuses to cast a furtive glance at Izuna, still buried beneath his cocoon of blankets and breathing peacefully. Oh to be so blissfully unaware.

He palms a kunai and fiddles with it beneath the table like Kurama might strike him for saying something foolish.

Instead, the Uzumaki just blinks at him. “Saiken and his Jincuuriki, Utakata, will be traveling with me back to Uzushio,” it’s said with a slight, indecipherable grin.

“And Izuna?”

“That’s up to him.”

They both turn their heads to look his way, still just a mound of blankets and tangled hair on the floor. “His wounds looked healed last night,” Kakashi remarks as casually as he can

muster. Talking to Kurama is always…something. He can feel the man's chakra rippling out of his form, like a barely contained inferno. It's disconcerting watching him act in this serene manner.

"He's too stubborn for his own good," Kurama huffs. He goes back to the scroll. "Won't let me help him until he's half delirious."

Kakashi opens his mouth to say something. To say, *It's because you remind him of his soulmate.* But Kurama already knows that. There's no way he doesn't. "It…feels like he's trying to die, sometimes."

"Ha," Kurama lets out a flat laugh. He puts the brush down and huffs a flame that dries the ink in a second. Licks of fire curl out from between his fangs as he says, "He's been trying to die for years now."

"Oh…"

The scroll is rolled together carefully, sealed with a paper tag. Kakashi has lost his appetite, but he doesn't want to waste the rest of his food, so he eats it all as quickly as possible. It also allows him a reprieve from speaking, though Kurama doesn't seem to mind the silence at all. Perhaps he even prefers it.

And then, out of nowhere, the Uzumaki's head tilts, his back straightens up, and Kakashi instantly responds by pulling the kunai from his sleeve. "What is it?"

Before he can respond, Kakashi sees a shadow thud onto the window sill. He flicks the kunai around, ready to throw at the slightest hint of aggression from the newcomer.

"Calm down," Kurama growls. No, commands, and Kakashi reluctantly follows. He sits back down as the stranger drops into the room and makes his way over to them. Once he's not backlit by the sun, Kakashi can make out his face a bit better. The stranger is a teen, probably, a bit thin and long faced, wearing a sky blue haori that's a little longer than how most shinobi like to wear.

"This is Utakata," Kurama. "Utakata, this is…Wolf."

Kakashi inclines his head. The man does the same.

"What's he doing here?" They both ask at the same time. They glare at each other.

"Utakata is Saiken's jinchuuriki."

"Ah…okay," he still can't help but eye the kid suspiciously.

"And Wolf is here because…" Kurama waves vaguely at Izuna, who is squinting at the three of them– *Wait a minute–*

Kakashi immediately hops over to Izuna, and he only does it because he's as far from the two extremely powerful jinchuuriki and for no other reason. "How long have you been awake?" He asks.

“Long enough to hear that bastard call me suicidal.”

Kakashi starts to sweat. “Nothing before that?”

Izuna looks at him critically. “You did too, didn’t you?”

Kakashi can’t help but look down at the hole left in Izuna’s shirt and the scar underneath. Izuna just scowls at him. “I don’t want to have this conversation right now.”

That makes Kurama laugh, “You never want to have a conversation.”

Kakashi is pretty sure he’s the only one who can see the way Izuna takes in a few careful breaths before he makes his way over to Kurama, and Utakata of course. The teen eyes Izuna carefully, then seems to defer to Kurama on what to do next, given how he keeps glancing at the man and ends up sitting almost behind him at the table.

Izuna sits down, and the tension between him and Kurama is so thick that everyone in the room immediately becomes uncomfortable. Even Utakata, who has just arrived on the scene fresh faced and without a second of context, shifts in his chosen spot, his pensive expression turning into a frown.

Then Izuna sighs, looking at the palm of his left hand before he squeezes it into a fist. There’s a long, drawn out pause where Kakashi is almost certain Kurama is about to get punched, but all Izuna does is hold his fist out in front of him.

Kurama snorts, rolls his eyes, and carefully aligns his own fist against Izuna’s.

It’s only a few seconds, but afterwards without any explanation, Kurama and Izuna stand up and it’s as if the last…however many hours it's been since Izuna almost died, have not happened.

“Alright,” Kurama says, “I’ve had enough of Mist. It’s time to go home.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi yes, it's been ages. I'm gonna be so for fuckin' real... this chapter has been 95% done since the last time I uploaded and it's just been... sitting there collecting dust but... Okay we'll do the IRL updates and y'all can roast me for not taking the 30 minutes it took me to finish the dang thing. Ok? Ok.

IRL Stuff:
Ok so much has happened in the like seven-eight months since last update so. I still haven't finished me degree bc of all those classes I failed. I was supposed to graduate in '24 May but obviously that didn't happen so THIS May is the real deal as long as I don't fuck it up!!

On the bright side of staying an extra year; I made friends with the class that were my juniors and they're all super awesome. I also got to learn stone setting much more formally than before, AND I got to TA for an advanced CAD class. That was all in the fall. Right now I am doing freelance CAD work for this jeweler with the possibility it'll turn into a full time job in the summer. I just can't believe that I'm like... doing the adulting things.

Honestly, the last six months have felt like...very chill. which I know is so crazy to say considering everything in the fucking world is breaking down right now. But in my personal life it was...I felt like I learned the most. I felt like I had the most to say. I feel like I found my voice. I learned how to TEACH people and it was...kind of crazy? And then when I went back to the studio the other day it was like...oh I've had a positive effect on the people I taught. They missed me, I could see their eyes light up when they saw me. And these are people I hardly know outside of class.

This and a few other things led me to realize that Oh. I can be loved, can't I? I am loved...aren't I? Maybe it's crazy I'm just figuring all of this out now but. Look. It's been a rough journey. I've always felt so isolated, like there's no one would could love me because of all my flaws. But that's not how love works. It's love in spite of your flaws. Love is ALWAYS in spite of your flaws (And I mean That Is The Whole Damn Point Of Naruto FFS!!!) but knowing that and feeling that are two separate things entirely.

Y'know I said this a few years ago in one of the first few chapters that I had no idea what was on the other side of all this grief and pain and loneliness. I was scared to get to a point in this story where I would have to start writing Sasuke healing (because damnit, I want him to heal so bad) but I didn't know if I could because it felt like I'd never get there myself. But I think...I think I'm getting there.

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